

Big Boys Do Fly III - Torn Between Two Worlds

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Summary: The third part of the trilogy: can our Super-heroes and their partners undo Tempus's meddling?

Big Boys Do Fly III - Torn Between Two Worlds

This is the third part of my 'mini-series' Big Boys Do Fly, based on an alternate-universe characterisation of Clark Kent/Superman and Lois Lane. If you have not read Parts 1 and 2, this story may not make much sense ;)

Thanks and kudos again to Margaret Brignell and Debby Stark for their 'Swap-Meet', which is responsible for some of the inspiration for this story, and to Karen Ward for her tremendous encouragement and for acting as a guinea-pig, which is much appreciated. One of the characters in this story is dedicated to Karen ;) Thanks also to Pam Jernigan, another 'Conor and Laura' supporter.

A further explanatory note, for those interested in continuity: I've used this story in part to 'tidy up' some of my own personal L&C universes, and so there are occasional links here to a few of my other stories. The 'Big Boys Do Fly' series is therefore in the same L&C universe as 'A Guest from the Blue' and 'A Ring on his Finger', and also 'A Love so Long in the Making' (see the names of L&C's children < g>), and also the forthcoming sequel to 'Love so Long'.

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~ Previously: Big Boys Do Fly II: Close Encounters ~

- Metropolis -

"You're not Clark!"

"No, I'm not," Conor replied thickly. He looked around him; the surroundings were completely unfamiliar. Where were Clark and HG Wells? And more important, *where was Laura*?

"Clark!" Lois wailed. "What happened? Why are *you* here instead of him, Conor?"

- An Alternate Universe -

Clark stared around him with dawning horror. Lois, Conor, the mysterious stranger and the interdimensional transport were nowhere to be seen.

No, scrub that, he thought viciously; helplessly. That was no mysterious stranger. It was Tempus.

Tempus had taken Lois, God knew where. And he had also taken Conor, by the looks of it.

And HG Wells, who represented his only route back to Lois, was...

...dead?

Big Boys Do Fly III: Torn Between Two Worlds

- 348 Hyperion Avenue, Metropolis -

Conor stared helplessly at Lois, desperately trying to take in what had happened to them. "Where are we?"

"The back yard of our - mine and Clark's - house," Lois replied in wooden tones, as she desperately tried to think of a way out of their predicament. She *had* to find Clark! She couldn't bear it if....

"So I got sent home with you, instead of Clark," Conor said slowly. He took a deep breath, trying to calm down. "Could it have been a mistake? I mean, just before it happened I was hugging you, and Clark was hugging Laura - could that Wells guy just have taken the wrong pair?"

Lois shook her head. "He wouldn't do that. And anyway, in all the times I've time-travelled or dimension-hopped, it's never worked like that. I've always had to climb into the machine myself." She paused, trying to remember. "What do you remember about it? All I can remember is saying goodbye to you - yeah, hugging - and then there was..." she hesitated, trying to focus, "... a bright light?"

Conor frowned. "I remember holding you, wishing you and Clark didn't have to go so soon, but after that...." He shook his head. "There *was* something... I don't know, I felt... weightless, my legs gave way... but I don't remember anything between that and waking up sitting in that - thing. Only it's gone now, too."

"And that was your way out of here and back to your world, Conor,"

Lois pointed out.

He grimaced. "Yeah, and Clark's way back to you." He noticed that Lois remained silent in response to his comment, which prompted him to add, "What's the problem, Lois? You think Clark may not be still in my world, do you?"

She nodded. "I don't know, Conor. This just... well, I have a horrible feeling about this whole thing." Her voice shook as she spoke, and he strode quickly to her side and wrapped his arm warmly around her shoulders.

"Hey, come on, Lois. For all we know, it might have been a mistake, and the transport thing could have gone back for Clark. He could be on his way back here right now." Conor's tone was deliberately upbeat as he tried to keep Lois's spirits up, although he felt far less confident than he sounded.

"I just don't think so," Lois replied glumly. "I don't feel good about this at all."

Conor stayed silent this time, reflecting that if Lois was right and something had gone horribly wrong, Laura was alone and without his protection. This time, it was Lois's turn to notice his tension, and she gripped his arm. "Conor, Clark's with Laura - at least, we hope he is. He'll look after her, you know he will."

"Yeah," Conor whispered, staring into the far distance. "He better."

- A remote beach, an Alternate Universe -

Laura dragged herself slowly to her knees, shaking her damp and sandy hair out of her face, and stared at Clark. "What happened? Where's Conor? Lois?"

Clark, shaken out of his initial stunned reaction, rushed at super-speed to HG Wells and turned his body over. He then knelt beside the writer and wiped the sand away from the man's mouth, at the same time checking for a pulse or any trace of breathing. After a moment, he closed his eyes briefly in silent thanks. Wells was alive, though barely.

He felt a gentle touch on his shoulder, and turned to see Laura frowning at him in concern.

"Clark - is there anything I can do?" she asked him softly, putting her own anxiety about Conor aside in deference to the more pressing problem of HG Wells, who looked to be in quite a sorry state.

"I think he'll be okay," Clark reassured her. "He doesn't seem to have swallowed too much water - he was just suffocating by lying face-down. I got to him in time."

Laura removed her light jacket and tucked it under Wells' head as Clark placed him in the recovery position. Clark then looked assessingly at Laura. "Are you okay? You were out of it for a minute or two...?"

She grimaced. "I think I just fainted. But what the hell happened? And where are Lois and Conor?"

Clark's shoulders slumped. "I have absolutely no idea. There was another man here - did you see him? - he did something to Lois and Conor which seemed to make both of them faint. In fact," he added thoughtfully, "I seem to be the only one who wasn't affected by whatever it was he did. But I don't understand why that is since Conor also has super-powers."

"Did you see who it was?" Laura asked anxiously. "Who would do something like this?"

Clark's mouth tightened, and his voice was harsh as he replied, "It was Tempus. I didn't recognise him because of the cloak and hood he wore, but I recognised the laugh as he disappeared. He's taken Lois and Conor."

"Why?" Laura's voice was shrill.

Several coughs came from the prone body on the sand. "Ahem, Miss Lindsay," Wells choked out, "Tempus usually has only one method to his madness. He wants to stop Superman's descendants from creating Utopia."

"So he's split each of us up from our soul-mates," Clark finished grimly.

- 348 Hyperion Avenue, Metropolis -

Lois shivered; it seemed to be early morning, and Metropolis was certainly chillier than a Caribbean beach. Conor threw her a sympathetic glance, hesitated, then stared at her intently. Feeling waves of heat wash over her, Lois's head shot up and she glared at Conor.

"Only *Clark* does that for me, okay?" she threw at him. The words hit him like chips of ice, and he flinched.

"I didn't mean to... I was only trying to help, okay?" he retorted, hurt that his attempt at kindness had been rejected so harshly.

Lois saw his expression and felt guilty. "I'm sorry... it's just... I'm worried *sick* about Clark, and I want him back here safe, all right?"

Conor shrugged angrily. "I'm pretty frantic about Laura too, might I remind you? And she doesn't have super-powers, unlike your husband!"

"Of course you are," Lois acknowledged, castigating herself for forgetting that she wasn't the only one separated from her partner. "But you know Clark will - "

"Will take care of her. I know." Conor's tone was resigned. "In the meantime, what the hell do we do about sorting this mess out?"

Lois shivered again. "Let's get inside first of all, then decide what to do."

- An Alternate Universe -

Laura shivered as the impact of Wells' words hit home. She and Conor had been separated. He had been taken away from her by that evil psychopath, Tempus; the man who had tried before to ensure that she and Conor never met, never grew up to be together. He had failed in the early 1940s, and so he had tried again in 1999.

She glanced at Clark, instantly noticing the white lines of tension around his mouth and eyes, the bleak expression on his face. He too was separated from Lois, the woman it was plainly obvious he loved more than his own life. As much as she missed Conor, was worried about him, Clark was clearly frantic about Lois.

She touched his arm. "Clark, I'm sure wherever they are they're together. And Conor will make sure Lois is okay."

Clark covered her hand with his own, throwing her a very brief smile. "I won't tell Lois you said that - she's pretty good at looking after herself, and hates being told what to do. But yeah, I hope he's with her, too - at least he can protect her with his powers if necessary."

Laura turned to Wells. "What has he - Tempus - done with them?"

Wells dragged himself to his feet, looking older and more helpless than Clark had ever seen him. "I... I really have no idea. But - oh, dear - he must have deduced your location by tracking either myself or the interdimensional transport. Then he just, he just overpowered us."

Clark fixed Wells with a hard stare. "How did he do that? He made all of you unconscious, and when I tried to grab him I felt like something threw me backwards."

"Oh dear," Wells said again; Clark clenched his fists, desperately trying to prevent himself shaking the little man until Wells came up with an explanation. "Mr Kent, I think Tempus must have brought a weapon from the future with him. There is something I have seen, a device which works on the principle of ultrasound. It can render people unconscious, and if anyone tries to attack a man carrying the device, the effect is like an electric shock."

Clark assimilated the information, then asked, "So why was Conor affected when I wasn't?"

"I honestly don't know, Mr Kent," Wells replied shakily. "Some things just cannot be explained."

"Where could he have taken them?" Laura demanded again. She was trying hard not to panic, but all she could think of was the memory of Lois's face when she had told Laura about the time when Tempus, as John Doe, had been elected president.

Wells shook his head slowly. "I can only hope that he has at least left them together, wherever they are."

"Well, you can trace them, can't you?" Clark demanded. "The first place to try is Metropolis - *my* Metropolis!" He ran his fingers furiously through his hair. "Can you take me there?"

Wells shook his head again. "Mr Kent, I only wish I could. But Tempus has taken the transport. I have no other means of taking you there."

Laura stared at him. "So does that mean you're stuck here too?"

"I... er, I, ah, I suppose I must be," Wells replied hesitantly, looking quite alarmed at the prospect.

"Oh, no, I couldn't possibly allow that, could I, Herb?" a sardonic voice came from somewhere. Clark whirled around; he could see no-one.

"Tempus?" he yelled angrily. "Show yourself, you monster! What have you done with my wife?!"

"Now, now, Clark! You're letting your temper show," the voice drawled. "It's not good for you, you know." There was a pause, then Tempus continued, "As for dear Lois, she's safe - for the moment. I haven't quite decided what to do with her yet. As for you and the delightful Ms Lindsay, you will be seeing me soon!"

Suddenly a shadowy figure materialised in front of HG Wells. Clark rushed forward at super-speed, only to find that he was grasping at thin air. Tempus and the writer had disappeared.

- 348 Hyperion Avenue, Metropolis -

Conor eyed the interior of the Lane-Kent household curiously as he followed Lois into the living-room. This was nothing like the sets the studios had used for either Clark Kent's or Lois Lane's apartments; although, he reminded himself, that was four years ago in the lives of the two reporters. They had been married for more than two years now; it was only natural that they would have a house rather than the bachelor apartments each had previously occupied.

The room was bright, airy and comfortable, with framed photographs of the couple and other family members scattered about on shelves and occasional tables. It was very different to his own home, but welcoming all the same. He could easily imagine Lois and Clark being entirely at home there. His eye was caught by a brightly-coloured object lying on the floor, and he bent to pick it up. It was a child's toy car, a large plastic object designed to be pushed along the floor by a toddler.

He was unprepared for Lois's reaction.

"Oh my God! Jon!" Her hands flew to her face, and her body crumpled. Conor caught her before she hit the ground, and he deposited her gently on the sofa.

"Lois? What's wrong?" Dumb question, he thought. What **isn't** wrong?

She turned liquid-brown eyes to him; for an instant he almost believed he was staring at Laura. But it was more than the hairstyle which made this woman differ from his fiancée.

"Jon - my son - he's still at Clark's parents' place!" she gasped.

Conor frowned. "He's safe there, isn't he?" He didn't understand Lois's concern; she and Clark had explained the babysitting arrangements they had made before leaving with HG Wells. The toddler should have been perfectly all right. Perhaps it was reaction, the strain of the last hour or so finally taking its toll on her.

"What time is it? What **day** is it?" Lois demanded agitatedly.

Instantly grasping her point, Conor seized the television remote control and read off the date and time. She closed her eyes briefly, then met his gaze again. "Nine am, on the same day Wells took us. At least that hasn't gone as horribly wrong as everything else." She heaved a sigh, then gave him a determined look. "You'll have to fly me to Smallville."

He shrugged. "Sure; that's no problem. But I think we really need to figure out what's happened here first. Who sent me here with you, and why. And why Clark was sent wherever he was sent."

"If he was sent anywhere," Lois added. "I mean, he and Laura could just still be in your world."

"They could," Conor agreed. "But my point is that you seem pretty sure that HG Wells wouldn't have done this, which means that someone else did. And if so, that person had a reason. And I think we're likely to find out that reason sometime." He paused, fixing Lois with a resolute expression so like her husband's. "I'm just not sure we want to risk getting Superman's child involved in this situation."

Lois frowned as her brain assimilated this idea. "You mean whoever did this may be trying to get at **Superman,** not Clark, or me, or...." She paused. "Of course! It has to be!" She jumped to her feet. "Conor, it has to be Tempus! No-one else would have the motive, or the means. And Tempus has always wanted to split Clark... well, Kal-El," she amended, remembering to whom she was speaking, "up from his soul-mate."

"And kill him - me," Conor added grimly. "And from what you and Clark told us, he's also tried to kill you once or twice. And in my world, he did kill the original Lois Lane."

"In which case...." Lois's hand went to her throat. "I guess we'd probably better stay well away from Jon." She sank down on the sofa again as it sank in that she would have to be separated from her son

for even longer.

Conor grimaced crookedly. "Maybe if we just go there for a quick visit - you could still leave him with the Kents...?" He wasn't quite sure that even this suggestion was such a good idea if there was any possibility that Tempus was watching them, but he could see that Lois was upset and missing her son.

She nodded. "I'd appreciate that, Conor. I hear what you're saying, but you know, it's not as if Tempus won't know Clark and I have a son."

"You mean he'd go after Jon anyway?" Conor asked, incredulous. "Do you think it'd be better if we brought him back here, where at least I can protect him?"

< And have Jon confused, thinking Conor is Clark?> Lois wondered bitterly. "No, I think I'd prefer him to stay with Jonathan and Martha until we figure a way out of this." She paused then, considering for a moment before continuing. "I'd better just give them a call for now - there isn't really time to go there before I'm due at the Planet."

Conor's expression seemed to scream incredulity that Lois would think about going into work at a time like this. Lois, however, glared at him. "I *have* to get to work - there's no way I'm going to tell Perry about what's happened, and anyway with the facilities at the Planet I might be able to find out whether Tempus has been seen anywhere in this world recently."

"You mean *we* might," Conor replied abruptly. When Lois stared at him in amazement, he explained. "How are you going to explain Clark's absence? Yet more excuses about meeting a source? I'll come with you, as Clark." When her expression suggested she would reject the idea he added, "Look, Lois, we're in this together. I want to get home to Laura as much as you want Clark back. And I think we need to work together on this."

"You're not a journalist," Lois objected. "I know when the other Clark was here he pretended to be my Clark, but at least he knew the paper, the people, how to behave...."

Conor pulled a face. "Lois, I'm an actor. And I've played Clark Kent, Daily Planet reporter, on TV for over a year - how hard can it be?"

- California, An Alternate Universe -

The flight back to Santa Monica had been almost unbearable, Laura reflected as she made coffee back at the house. Clark had carried her in his arms, of course, but she was used to flying with Conor like that. It was hard to come to terms with the fact that Conor was no longer here. And Clark, dressed in the Super-suit at any rate, looked so like Conor. It would have been so tempting to nestle against him in the way she would when with Conor; except that this was not Conor. If nothing else, their scents were very different; Conor used a very distinctive musky fragrance for men, while whatever Clark used was quite different - sandalwood, she thought abstractedly.

Clark himself had maintained a fixed, harsh expression as he had flown them back. Laura realised that it must have been equally difficult for him: he would be used to flying with Lois, of course, and he would have far more memories of being with her than she, Laura, had of Conor as Superman.

But... Laura made a deliberate attempt to pull herself together. < You're acting as if you're never going to see Conor again! That *cannot* happen!> she told herself firmly.

Returning to the living-room with two cups of coffee, she faced Clark. "Okay, so when can you build a time-machine so we can get our partners back?"

Clark blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"You know - build a machine like the one Wells had. In the script I read for the show, you did that the time Tempus went back to 1966 to kill you as a baby."

Clark's expression cleared. "Laura, sure, I built a time-machine then. But first, I had plans which showed me how to, and second, *this* isn't a time-machine. It's an interdimensional transport."

"Oh...." Laura's face fell. "There's a difference?"

Clark, putting aside his own anxiety for a moment, crossed to her to place his hands reassuringly on her shoulders. "Hey, we'll find a way through this, trust me. Lois and I have been in worse trouble before now and we got through it. I'll get Conor back for you, and I'll find Lois as well."

Laura sighed; she really needed to start thinking positively. "I guess Lois would be half-way to figuring out a solution by now?"

Clark flicked her cheek lightly with his finger in an attempt to cheer her up. "Sometimes. That's the way she is - I often just end up watching her in disbelief. Forget all the things I can do - I just can't keep up with her when she goes off on some tangent and comes up with a brilliant solution." He paused, staring into the middle distance as if remembering, then released Laura, taking a step back. "But don't underestimate yourself. Conor told me how you figured out who he really is - that was pretty smart."

She shrugged. "I don't know - I just noticed a few things over the months, and then when he kept us in the air after that accident on-set, it all just fell into place."

"Not for him," Clark pointed out softly.

"Okay," Laura said matter-of-factly, thinking that however nice Clark was being, it wasn't getting them anywhere. "So what do we do now? Hope that Mr Wells is okay and that he can come back for you?"

But Clark shook his head, a discouraging expression on his face. "I'm not sure that we can count on him. We have absolutely no idea what Tempus might have done with him."

"But what if an older version of him, knowing that Tempus did this, comes instead?" This seemed possible to Laura; she couldn't actually see HG Wells wanting this mixed-up situation to continue for any longer than was absolutely unavoidable.

Clark considered this for a moment or two before responding. "I guess it's possible - always supposing Tempus didn't just kill him. But..." he paused for a moment, then added, "Well, Tempus had opportunities to kill Wells before now, and he didn't take them. We sort of got the idea that he quite likes having Wells around - sees him as a challenge."

"Well, maybe he will come then." Laura made herself sound positive; it was the only way to get through this situation, she reflected. She had to convince herself that she would see Conor again.

It was hard, now, for her to remember a time when Conor hadn't been a major part of her life. Even before the unforgettable day when they had not only realised that he was actually Superman in reality, but had also discovered their mutual love, Conor had been important to her.

When they had first met, at auditions, she had been impressed by Conor's strong physique and obvious good looks, but hadn't taken the trouble to notice anything else about him. Even on the first time they had been required to kiss for the cameras, she had simply regarded it as another part of the job, a mechanical task which had to be performed with strict precision. And yet, gradually, almost in the same way as Lois had warmed to Clark, she had realised that Conor was actually a very down-to-earth, funny and downright nice guy, and they had gradually become friends. She had really missed him during the summer interregnum, and their reunion when they started work on the second season had been that of two close friends.

When she had fallen in love with him, she couldn't have said; all she had known was that she gradually found it very hard to separate her feelings for Conor from what she was sure were her character's underlying feelings for Clark. When he had invaded her dreams for the fourth night in succession, she had given up trying to pretend that he was simply a friend, and had begun to look for an opportunity to ask him out. Then there had been that morning in his trailer, when he had completely unself-consciously stripped off his shirt in front of her, and she had been unable to stop herself staring hungrily at him. She had wanted to run her hands over his chest; instead, she had simply, involuntarily, looked. And he had caught her at it, and if they hadn't been disturbed, who knew what might have....

But in any case, later that day things had resolved themselves, and other than getting used to being engaged to someone with a double life and two jobs to match, she had been blissfully happy ever since.

Until now....

How would she cope if she never saw Conor again?

- The Daily Planet, Metropolis -

Conor glanced around him self-consciously yet again, trying to be unobtrusive about it. Despite his over-confident assurances to Lois, he did not particularly relish playing the role of Clark Kent for real, whatever about being Superman. Sure, he knew quite a lot of Clark's history, and by the look of it many of the Planet staff looked exactly like the actors who had played them in his world, so he was unlikely to make mistakes by failing to recognise someone Clark worked with every day... unless, of course, there had been some staff changes at the Planet. That was quite likely, he thought wryly; it had been four years since the stage in Clark's career the second season of the show had depicted. Although, so far, he had been fortunate enough not to encounter anyone he hadn't recognised; even Jimmy looked identical to the actor who had played the role in the second season of the TV show. Dustin Frayling would be amused if he knew that he, not the first-season actor, was the counterpart of the real Jimmy, Conor thought inconsequentially.

And, just as in the TV show, Jimmy called Clark 'CK'. That was helpful; once Conor had heard the youthfully enthusiastic voice call across the newsroom, "Hey, CK!" he had instantly known that the speaker had to be Jimmy, even before he had caught sight of the young man. Jimmy was as puppyish in his enthusiasm and eagerness as his TV counterpart had played the role, though this Jimmy was some years older and clearly more experienced. He was a little taller and considerably thinner than Dustin had been; but then, this Jimmy was about four years older. It was clear that Jimmy also considered himself to be a good friend of 'CK's'; Conor just hoped that if the younger man suggested a beer after work he would be able to continue the deception and make appropriate responses to any comments.

The interior of the Planet was also in some respects similar to the set the TV company had used, which Conor found surprising. Okay, the ceiling was real; there were no overhead lights and boom microphones and wires trailing everywhere. The desks also looked as if they were used, instead of simply having had a few pieces of paper scattered on them for the sake of 'authenticity', and the computers were real. Yet despite these differences, Conor had almost experienced a sense of deja-vu when he had followed Lois through the elevator doors into the newsroom....

Once Lois had been persuaded that he should masquerade as Clark, she had led the way upstairs and shown him the bathroom and spare bedroom, and had then disappeared into her own room, returning a couple of minutes later with a full change of clothing and a spare pair of Clark's glasses. He had dressed quickly and then styled his hair as Clark did, making use of the men's styling product which he'd noticed in the bathroom. When Lois had returned, he had noticed her instant shock and withdrawal with no surprise at all; after all, he would have been equally disturbed to see Lois looking exactly like Laura.

Recognising that this was difficult for her, he had deliberately tried to distract her. "So, are we ready to go?"

"You're not," she had replied bluntly. At his questioning glance, she had added, "Your hair. You can't go out like that."

"What's wrong with my hair?" he had demanded. "I did it exactly like...." < Clark> he had finished silently.

"It's too long," she had told him abruptly. "Clark wears his a lot shorter now. You'll have to cut it."

< But Laura likes my hair this length> he had objected silently, but decided not to say it aloud. She was right: there was no way he could appear in the Planet newsroom with hair a couple of inches long than Clark's had been only the day before.

"Okay," he had conceded resignedly. "I'll need a couple of mirrors...."

"Bathroom," she had instructed quickly before leaving him to it.

So he had shorn a couple of inches off his hair, using his photographic memory to remember exactly how Clark's hair had looked. When he'd finished, he would himself have been hard put to tell his reflection apart from the real Clark Kent.

In the car, Lois's attitude had made it clear that she would prefer to pass the journey in silence, but Conor had felt that there were things he needed to be aware of if he was to pass himself off successfully as Clark. Sure, he was a professional actor, *and* he had played Clark for the TV show until a few weeks ago - and from everything Clark had said, 'their' Daily Planet was pretty much the same as the real thing - but this was, in effect, a live performance. No rehearsal. No re-takes if he made a mistake. He had to *be* Clark Kent, and that included knowing exactly how Clark addressed colleagues, any particular habits Clark was known for, and the regular daily routine.

So now here they were at the Planet, and he was doing his best to act like a busy working journalist - however a busy working journalist behaves, he reflected wearily. He wasn't entirely sure what he should be doing, but he had booted up Clark's computer and was now trying to make it appear that he was busy writing up a story; in fact, he had started by trying to piece together an account of what had happened on that beach in the Caribbean. This, however, had ceased as soon as Perry White had strolled over and demanded to know when 'Clark' would be ready to turn in his story on some pensions fraud.

< Help!> Conor had thought, surreptitiously glancing over at Lois to see whether she had caught this exchange. It seemed that she hadn't, so he had given Perry what he hoped was a realistic, Clark-like, confident smile and a response that the story would be finished by lunchtime. This had seemed to satisfy the editor, since he had simply grunted and walked off.

So now Conor was faced with the task of producing a newspaper article on an investigation he knew nothing about. Playing Clark Kent on television had certainly not prepared him for this. Lois had still seemed to be occupied with whatever was engaging her attention, so he had turned his attention to Clark's hard drive. It hadn't been too difficult to find the files relating to Clark's current stories; the man appeared to be highly organised, unlike his wife judging by the clutter on Lois's desk. He quickly found the draft of the pensions article, and realised that although it was substantially complete, there were missing chunks where Clark had inserted a note to himself to 'do more research' or 'add piece on motive/evidence'. < Okay> thought Conor; < so where do I go from here?>

He searched Clark's desk; the surface area was almost empty, but in one of the drawers he found a file which seemed to relate to this story. Quickly glancing around to ensure that no-one was watching him, he read the contents of the file at super-speed. Some of the information Clark had wanted to add was there, so in the absence of any other solution - and given that he was anxious not to arouse any suspicions or do anything which might cause trouble for Clark later - Conor wrote a couple of additional paragraphs dealing with the material which Clark had signalled was necessary, doing his best to emulate Clark's style as he did so.

As he was finishing, he became aware of someone approaching; he concentrated briefly with his super-senses and realised that it was Lois. Turning to greet her with a deliberate smile intended for public consumption, he murmured softly, "I really need to talk to you."

"I'll bet you do," she replied almost under her breath, but knowing that he could hear her. "What are you doing with Clark's files?"

She was now leaning against his desk, a mere couple of feet from him, so he could speak quietly. "Your editor wanted this story today, so I thought I'd better make it look like I was doing some work."

Lois turned her attention to the computer screen, clearly scanning his additions. He noticed her frown, then look taken aback; possibly his work was better than she'd expected. As she straightened, however, all she said was, "You'd better email this to me when you're done so I can take a look at it. I know Clark's style better than he does and if anything's wrong I can fix it."

Conor raised an eyebrow in resigned amusement. Clearly his work couldn't be all that bad or she would never have suggested that she would just look it over. If she'd really thought it was terrible, she would just have taken over. He simply nodded, then added, "We should try to get out of here at lunchtime - talk, see whether either of us has come up with anything."

She simply nodded at that, adding quietly, "I really want to see Jon later."

"I haven't forgotten," he assured her. "Whenever you want to go, I'll take you."

She went back to her own desk, leaving him to get on with the story; when he'd done all he could on that and sent it to her, he set to work at figuring out all the databases to which the Daily Planet had access. He wasn't entirely sure what he was searching for, but he entered 'Tempus' and 'time travel' as part of his searches. To his surprise, he found some matches, but upon reading the information provided he discovered that it referred to the time when Tempus had escaped from the asylum and been elected President. Lois and Clark had told him and Laura about that incident the day they'd gone to Smallville. < So Tempus is known of in this world > he reflected < but only as a deranged mental patient and criminal.>

He sat back in his chair and pondered the situation. Not being an investigative reporter like his counterpart, he was unused to looking

at complicated situations and thinking his way logically through them; his powers of deduction, he supposed, were sadly under-used. Without the intervention of HG Wells, he could see no way out of this predicament; he certainly had no idea where to find an... an interdimensional transport, Lois had called it. And he simply could not remember what had happened to Mr Wells in the confusion on the beach. But if Wells had not travelled with them to Metropolis, did that mean that he was still in Conor's own dimension? And if so, surely Clark would be able to work with him to find some solution, assuming that Tempus had removed the transport from Wells' reach.

Lois had mused aloud, on the journey into the Planet - during which Conor had been silently amused to discover that she really did drive a silver Jeep Grand Cherokee, though a newer model than his show had used - about the possibility of getting some scientist friend of theirs to help. A Dr Bernard Clint... no, Klein, that was the man's name. It seemed the scientist worked at STAR Labs, which was news to Conor; although STAR Labs had occasionally featured in the TV show, it had never been suggested that Lois, Clark or Superman had a special relationship with any of its staff. Now it appeared that Klein was in a sense Superman's personal physician. Conor hadn't quite worked out whether Klein was aware of Superman's real identity, and hadn't wanted to risk antagonising Lois by enquiring. He had already had a lecture from her about being very careful in the use of his powers and the need to ensure that *no-one* became suspicious about either Superman or Clark.

He frowned as he considered Lois's hostility towards him. It had started the instant she had realised that he, rather than Clark, occupied the seat beside her in the transport as it had settled in the back yard of her home. He understood perfectly the reason for it: it certainly couldn't be easy for her, being separated from her husband and fearing that she might never see him again, while at the same time being confronted with a man who looked identical to Clark, was even wearing his clothes and pretending to be her husband. But he just wished that she would remember that he was also missing Laura - and while Lois and Laura did not look identical, due to different hairstyles and preference in clothes, she *sounded* like Laura, and with longer hair it would be difficult to tell them apart.

His musings were interrupted suddenly as his super-hearing kicked in; someone was calling for help, and it sounded serious. There was no way that Superman could fail to respond, and he glanced around resignedly to ensure that he could make his exit undetected. There was no way that he wanted to endanger Clark's relationship with his work colleagues by any careless behaviour. No-one was paying him any particular attention, and so he hurried off in the general direction of the restrooms, ducking around the corner to the fire escape once out of sight of the newsroom.

Lois noticed Conor hurrying out of the newsroom and slumped in her chair, muscles she hadn't even realised she had been tensing instantly relaxing. It had been sheer torture sitting at her desk and continually catching glimpses of him, sitting at Clark's desk which was directly in her line of vision, using Clark's computer, looking *exactly* like Clark; but not Clark. Her first instinct had been right, she reflected: she should have insisted that he stay at home

and let her tell Perry that Clark was sick. Maybe they could still do that, she mused; she would tell Conor, when he returned, to plead a headache or something and go back to the house. She couldn't possibly make it through the day with him there.

It wasn't that she disliked Conor, she acknowledged wearily. Far from it; after that first awkward half-hour or so both she and Clark had come to like their counterparts enormously, and all four had very much enjoyed their 'time out' in the Caribbean. But however much she liked him, Conor was not Clark; she now faced separation from Clark for God-knew how long, and having to *pretend* that Conor was Clark was just... more than she could stand.

And telling Jonathan and Martha what had happened had been very painful too, she remembered, her mind drifting back to that telephone conversation before they had left the town house. It hadn't been quite the most difficult conversation she had ever had with Clark's parents: that had been the time she'd had to call them after Tempus had managed to send Clark into infinity. On that occasion, she really had believed that he was gone for ever. This time, as far as she knew he was simply stranded in another dimension, while one of his alternate counterparts was in Metropolis in his place.

The Kents had assured her that Jon was fine, that he seemed to be very content to be with his grandparents and that they were perfectly happy to keep him for the time being. Lois was only slightly reassured at this, as she had felt a little hurt that her son should be so happy away from her. Martha had been as supportive as ever, soothing Lois and stating with confidence her belief that Clark would find a way home to Lois. Jonathan had added that if Conor was in any way like Clark, he would also do his best to right the situation. Lois was less sure about that: after all, Conor had only been Superman in his world for a very short time, and as far as she could tell, he was not as resourceful as Clark. No, she reflected; if it was up to her and Conor to find a way out of this, it would be her own efforts which would find a solution.

She grimaced, realising that she couldn't sit at her desk in contemplation all day without inviting unwanted attention, and forced herself to focus on work. Turning her attention to her computer screen, she noticed that the minimised icon representing her mailbox was blinking; on calling it up, she noticed that at some point Conor must have sent her Clark's pensions fraud story. Sighing, she opened the file in the expectation of having to do substantial rewriting. However, she was thoroughly taken aback to discover that the sections Conor had added - which he had clearly marked as additions, for her benefit - were actually pretty good. The style was also very similar to Clark's: he must have spent some time studying Clark's writing style, Lois realised. All that was required for her to do was to make a couple of minor stylistic changes in keeping with the Planet's house style guide; nothing of substance needed altering.

Some time later, she was conscious of someone hovering behind her; without turning around, she knew that it was Conor. < What now? > she thought ill-humouredly. < Can't he even think of a decent excuse to cover his absence as Superman? >

She turned to face him, at the same time as he took a further step towards her and placed a hand caressingly on her shoulder. Taking a sharp intake of breath, she gazed deliberately down at his hand and

then glared at him. He bent and inclined his head towards her, a half-smile on his lips which didn't quite appear to reach his eyes.

"Lois," he murmured softly, his tone gentle and his words low enough not to be overheard, "we have a problem."

"Yes?" Her tone was not inviting.

"I overheard your colleagues talking... super-hearing... they all think we've - or you and Clark have - had a fight, because we're not, ah... well, being affectionate to each other the way you and he normally are. I wasn't sure if you wanted them to go on thinking that."

Lois was silent for a moment as she considered the consequences of this. Of course, if her colleagues believed that she and 'Clark' had fought, then they wouldn't expect any public demonstrations of affection. On the other hand, what *she* could expect would be well-meaning interventions from people like Perry and Jimmy, anxious to discover what was wrong and to help them make amends. And there would be the newsroom gossips, agog to discover what had gone wrong for the Planet's 'perfect couple', as they had been dubbed sardonically by one or two jealous individuals. And of course, Conor would be at the receiving end of sympathetic glances and advances from certain of the women in one or two other Planet departments, who had always been attracted to Clark and would simply jump at the opportunity to take advantage of trouble between Lois and 'Clark'.

Did she want all of that to happen? Of course she didn't.

She turned to glance at Conor. "Okay, no, I don't. But..." her voice dropped to a whisper in the knowledge that Conor could hear her, "I can't... *pretend* that you're Clark in that way."

He moved closer, protecting her from curious eyes with his body. "It's no problem, Lois." His head moved even closer to hers, giving the impression to any observers that he was whispering sweet nothings into her ear. "Trust me here, Lois - I'm an actor, it's my job to know how to make this look convincing. Just follow my lead."

As she nodded faintly, he swivelled her chair slightly so that, she realised, she was more fully in view of those colleagues who sat nearby. Keeping his hand on her shoulder, he asked, in a soft, affectionate tone which was pitched at a level designed to project some distance away, "So I'm forgiven, then, sweetheart?"

< Okay> Lois conceded silently, < this should be simple enough.> She smiled in return, realising suddenly that, although he had placed her in a position where she could be seen, she wasn't in anyone's direct line of vision and so her facial expressions would not be as visible as his - and therefore did not need to be as convincing. "Yes, you're forgiven," she replied, forcing a playful note into her voice.

"Good." Conor's voice was now deeper in pitch, his eyes focusing on hers. His hand shifted from her shoulder, curving itself along her jaw and into her hair. < Clark's caress> Lois realised with a shock, then remembered that Conor had also touched Laura in just the same

way. He must have remembered that she had remarked on it, Lois thought, forcing herself to relax and act as if she welcomed the caress.

His head lowered. Lois froze momentarily as she realised his intentions. < He's going to kiss me!> she thought agitatedly. "No! - I can't do this!" she whispered, knowing that Conor could hear her.

"Trust me, Lois," he replied softly, under his breath. He was very close now; she could feel his breath against her face. She tried not to jerk away as his lips touched her, but then realised in amazement that instead of kissing her full on the lips, he was actually kissing just above her upper lip. His mouth was moving in a parody of a passionate kiss, but it was barely touching her own lips.

"Act as if you're kissing me back," he whispered, under cover of shifting his grip on her. She tried to comply, closing her eyes and remembering similar occasions when Clark had kissed her at her desk. It was still a relief when Conor straightened.

"That's a TV technique," he murmured very quietly. "Believe me, from the right angle it looks exactly like a real, passionate kiss - and this will have been the right angle."

Lois nodded, feeling herself incapable of any other comment at that precise moment. She was grateful when Conor then suggested that they should go out for lunch; it meant a break from the need to pretend in front of the newsroom, and a chance to recover from this faking of an intimate moment. She allowed him to help her to her feet and into her jacket, and then led the way out of the newsroom.

- California, an Alternate Universe -

It was past dawn, Clark noticed; he must have been flying all night. He felt a momentary twinge of guilt at leaving Laura alone and unprotected, but after she had departed to her own bedroom and left him to his own devices, he had realised that he couldn't face simply going to bed in the guest-room. Not without Lois; not with her double sleeping just down the hall.

As he had said to Lois when they had first arrived in Santa Monica, Laura looked exactly like Lois. He was aware that none of the other three recognised the resemblance to the same degree, but then, neither Conor nor Laura had seen Lois as she had been in the first couple of years of their partnership. Laura wore her hair exactly as Lois had done then, and while her manner was generally softer than Lois's had been in the first few months of their acquaintance, she occasionally had flashes of the old Lane temper which, these days, was rarely seen. The return flight from the Caribbean had been very difficult for him; all his instincts had been to cradle Laura tightly against him, and yet however much his body was urging him to cuddle and caress her, his brain was reminding him that she was not Lois, his much-loved wife and partner, but her identical, alternate-world, twin.

Of course, as long as Lois had been with him in this alternate universe, none of this had presented a problem. Laura had simply been

Laura Lindsay, fiancée of his counterpart Conor Kane. He had liked Laura very much, just as he liked Conor. Now, he found it difficult to be in her company. And yet, he recognised, he had no choice but to be in her company, for as long as it took to get this mess sorted out. This problem had been caused by Tempus, who no doubt had his own dastardly agenda. In fact, before leaving Tempus had assured them that he would be back; that they would be seeing him soon. Clark had no doubt at all that this would not be a friendly visit.

He landed silently in the shadowed end of Conor's large garden and, spinning quickly into his jeans and T-shirt, walked swiftly back towards the house. Lowering his glasses, he saw that Laura was in the kitchen making coffee. She looked tired and there were dark shadows under her eyes; she had also not taken her usual trouble over her hair and clothes. He felt a pang of guilt at not having been there when she had come down; clearly she had not been able to sleep either.

Striding into the kitchen, he greeted her kindly; she spun around to stare at him.

"Clark! I - I thought you must be upstairs still."

He grimaced, shaking his head. "I couldn't sleep - I went out flying." He accepted the coffee she offered him, adding, "Did you manage to sleep at all?"

She shook her head, her dark hair swinging lightly around her face. "Not really. I kept seeing Conor on that beach... collapsing.... Clark, what if this Tempus killed him?" she asked fearfully.

He smiled, he hoped reassuringly, at her. "I don't think he's done that - apart from anything else, he didn't have any Kryptonite with him. I don't know what he's done with them, but something tells me they're not harmed in any way." Not yet, he added silently. He sighed deeply. "I guess, from what Tempus said before he left, that he's got plans - he intends to take his own good time over this."

He fell silent then, leaning against the counter as he stared broodingly into his coffee. There was another very real fear which was preying on his mind, which he had not so far allowed Laura to guess at, and that concerned Jon. If Tempus was in Metropolis, if he intended to try yet again to prevent the creation of Utopia, then he would also have to kill the son of Clark Kent and Lois Lane - unless he had some evil plan in mind to subvert the child. If he and Lois were out of the way, and Jon was brought up by someone with, for example, the ethics of a Tempus or a Lex Luthor, the end result might well be the same - if not worse. An evil Super-being... it didn't bear thinking about.

And it could happen, Clark reflected. He recalled his conversation with Lois on the nHeHe HeHehefihnbporo ight they had spent together in this house. He had argued that upbringing had a lot to do with the differing personalities and ethics of the three Supermen they knew: he, Conor and the other Clark. Being brought up by Martha and Jonathan Kent had been a major influence on his own thinking and morality, Clark was aware; it was also bound to have affected the other Clark despite his having lost his parents at the age of ten. Conor had not had the Kents as role-models, and as such his outlook differed from Clark's in a few respects: he had quite a pessimistic

nature, and was more lacking in self-confidence in some respects than Clark had ever been. And should the one-year-old Jon Kent be taken out of his current environment and be surrounded with amoral evil, who knew how he might end up?

He hoped that Lois had the good sense to leave Jon with his parents; he was aware that she would want to see their son, and fully expected that she would insist that Conor take her to Smallville. But he really did not want Jon brought back to Metropolis. He refused, however, to allow himself to admit that part of this reluctance was due to the possibility of Jon believing that Conor was his father.

It had only been in the past month or so that Jon had begun to speak; he called Clark Da-Da and Lois Mama now, and was beginning to learn other baby-words. As soon as he saw Clark each morning now, the toddler held out his arms to be lifted out of his crib, and then wanted to be placed on the floor from where he could walk in a few tottering steps across to his father; he would then cling to Clark's lower leg and scream delightedly for Clark to take a few steps with Jon hanging onto his leg. Then there were rituals connected with mealtimes, bath-times, bedtime; playtime in the living-room where Clark would wave Jon's toys around just out of the child's reach while Jon shouted excitedly as he tried to grab them. Then Clark would swing his son up and carry him around the room on his shoulder, something Lois now found difficult since the one-year-old was getting quite heavy. The thought that Conor might take his place in these rituals was something Clark found very difficult to accept.

He forced himself to concentrate on his surroundings then as he realised that Laura was watching him through lowered eyelashes. "Sorry - I was miles away," he apologised.

But she shook her head. "No problem. I guess you're thinking about the same thing as I am."

He gave her a wry smile. "I guess." He took a deep breath, telling himself that he needed to stop brooding and concentrate on dealing with the situation. The problem was that so far, no solution had occurred to him; the hours spent flying had not even given him the barest germ of an idea.

"So what do we do now?" Laura asked, running her hand through her loose, unstyled hair. "Try to contact HG Wells?"

"I wish I could," Clark replied. "I've never been able to, though - he tends to contact us when he needs us."

She nodded, as if this made sense to her. Shifting away from her position leaning against the counter opposite Clark, she remarked, "I suppose I should go take a shower and get dressed properly."

"Yeah, me too," he agreed.

Laura halted on her way out of the kitchen. "Clark, I... I don't know what you thought we should do for the immediate future, but... well, I think maybe you should pretend to be Conor for now. I mean, just in case anyone should see you - well, we don't want to have to explain where Conor's gone, or who you are, do we?"

Clark stilled; that hadn't occurred to him. "I guess you're right. So - I need to look like him, right? No glasses, casual hairstyle?"

"That should do," Laura replied. "You can borrow any of his clothes you need as well."

A couple of hours later, Clark sat across from Laura on one of the sofas in the large, airy lounge as she briefed him on things which she felt he ought to know about Conor and about the two of them. He was feeling a little awkward without his customary glasses, and had to keep reminding himself that they were not an essential part of his disguise in this world. As they talked, they were interrupted suddenly by the sound of a buzzer; Laura looked perturbed and explained that there was someone at the gates of the house. The buzzer sounded again, twice, impatiently; Laura sighed and muttered that she'd better see who it was.

Clark, left to his own devices momentarily, found himself listening in on Laura's conversation with his super-hearing. Shocked, he heard a female voice, distorted by the electronic intercom, mounting a tirade.

"...and I realised that if I waited until you invited me to come and visit I'd still be waiting next year! To think that I have to stand at the gate and *ask* for *permission* to come in and see my *own*...."

Laura's mother, Clark thought with a resigned grin. He didn't even have to see the woman to know that he was about to meet Karen Lindsay - Karen Lane as was, he mused. Of course, Laura's mother was actually related to Sam Lane, he reminded himself, going over in his mind what he knew of Laura's family tree. Karen Lindsay was the daughter of Sam Lane's brother and so, he realised, there was actually no reason why she should be anything like Ellen Lane. But from the sound of that brief harangue....

Laura came hurrying back into the room at that moment, an apologetic, harassed expression on her face.

"I'm sorry, Clark, but it's - "

"Your mother," he finished in a sympathetic tone.

"Yeah. I've had to tell her to come on in," she replied, looking anxious.

"Of course you did," Clark reassured her. "Look, it's okay. Just tell me quickly - how well does she know Conor?"

Laura shrugged. "Not all that well. She's met him about three or four times - we all went out for a meal and spent the next day together when she visited LA last year, then I took Conor home with me for a day a few months ago."

"What does he call her?" Clark enquired, not wanting to make any mistakes which would be noticed.

"Karen," Laura informed him. "Oh - and he'd probably kiss her cheek or something like that. He's pretty... courtly with older women."

< That's pretty much what I'd do> Clark reflected, thinking that it was probably his parents' example which led him to treat his elders with respect. He certainly wouldn't have called Lois's mother 'Ellen' on such short acquaintance, but then Conor and Laura were engaged. Perhaps Conor had talked with Karen Lindsay on the telephone as well, he thought, but didn't get an opportunity to ask Laura since they were interrupted by the ringing of the doorbell.

Thinking that, since this was Conor's house, he should show some sort of welcome to 'his' future mother-in-law, Clark followed Laura out to the door and stood just behind her as she admitted her mother.

Physically, Karen Lindsay bore no resemblance at all to Ellen Lane; if anything, she resembled Sam Lane. She was not especially tall, but her bone-structure and the shape of her eyes were very reminiscent of Sam, Clark thought; he wondered idly what Laura's father looked like.

But he was given no opportunity to continue this train of thought, since Karen Lindsay was marching smartly across the hall towards him, talking non-stop as she went.

"I must say, I would never have imagined that my daughter would get engaged and *not* invite me to celebrate with her and my future son-in-law. I really think it's most discourteous behaviour of you both, leaving me to make my own way out here to see you. Anyone would think that your mother was *unwelcome,* Laura. If your father was alive to see how you treat me, he'd turn in his grave...."

Trying not to show his amusement at this piece of illogicality, or in fact the uncanny resemblance to Ellen Lane at her most verbose, Clark stepped forward to touch the older woman's arm. "It's good to see you, Karen," he murmured, bending to plant a kiss on her cheek. "And I'm sorry we hadn't managed to invite you here yet - it's just been really busy over the last few weeks, you know? Moving Laura in here, getting engaged, dealing with the Press...." He let the sentence hang, hoping for his counterpart's sake that Mrs Lindsay would accept the explanation. It would at least be some small thing Clark could do for Conor if he ensured that the man's future mother-in-law didn't bear a grudge against her daughter's fiance.

As the morning progressed, Clark did his best to present a convincing impersonation of Conor; he appeared to be succeeding, he thought. Or perhaps it was simply that Karen Lindsay seemed to be similar to Ellen Lane in other respects as well? She certainly seemed to be quite self-centred, he thought with some relief. While she pursued with great vigour a discussion about wedding plans, her aim appeared to be to ensure that Conor and Laura got married with as much publicity - and as much exposure for the bride's mother - as possible.

Allowing his mind to wander a little as Laura and her mother discussed bridesmaids' dresses - with no great show of enthusiasm on Laura's part, Clark noted - it occurred to him that Karen Lindsay was actually from out of town. Did this mean that she was expecting to be invited to stay? His heart sank at the prospect. It was not so much that he felt dread at the prospect of a day or two in the company of someone who resembled his own mother-in-law; he was by now well

accustomed to handling Ellen Lane, and he felt confident that he had now achieved a good and warm relationship with her. It was the thought that he would have to continue pretending to be Conor, in the company of the woman who would be Conor's mother-in-law. He would be carrying on the masquerade while being observed at close quarters, and by someone who would expect him to be intimate with Laura.

He had done his best to give the impression of a man deeply in love; he had sat next to Laura on the sofa and draped his arm around her shoulders, taking her hand in his free one. She had played her part as well, giving him loving glances every so often; Clark could see why Laura Lindsay was so highly regarded as an actress. He could see that her glances and smiles did not reach her eyes, but no-one who was any further away from her would be able to tell.

Just when he was despairing at the thought that Mrs Lindsay was surely intending to stay, she got to her feet and announced that she had to drive into Beverly Hills to meet a friend. It seemed they had plans for lunch and shopping on Rodeo Drive. Laura shot a quick glance at Clark, at once apologetic and long-suffering, before turning back to her mother.

"Would you like me to come with you, Mother?" she enquired sweetly.

"Well, I did hope that you'd come," Karen replied in a long-suffering tone. "We haven't even got around to discussing your engagement party yet, and I simply have to choose something to wear for that. And I want to talk to you about where we're going to hold it. Beverly Hills is simply too passe these days, and *I* thought we should consider chartering a plane and holding the party in New York." She got to her feet and collected her things before turning to face Clark. "So, Conor, I'd like you to start putting together a list of your friends and family so that we know how many invitations we need to have printed...."

"*Mother*!" Laura interrupted. "Can we talk about this another time, please? I'm not even sure... I mean, Conor and I don't know if we want any fuss about this, let alone an engagement party."

Karen swept out the door, leaving Laura to trail along helplessly behind her. As Clark stood, Laura turned back to throw him a regretful, apologetic glance; Clark gestured that it was okay and that he'd see her later.

"I'm sorry, Clark," Laura murmured under cover of her mother's babbling. "I'll be back as soon as I can...."

Lois would have appreciated this, Clark thought as the door slammed behind the two Lindsay women. She would probably also have taken Laura aside later and warned her about the problems inherent in allowing her mother too much of a say over the wedding plans, he reflected with a wry smile, remembering his own appalled disbelief over plans for Swiss bell-ringers, white doves and far more guests than he had ever wanted at his wedding.

Still, he was now alone for at least three hours, he recognised, dragging his attention back to the present. Time to take a flight around the city, perhaps; he could cover for Conor by allowing Superman to be seen out and about, while at the same time he could

try yet again to think of a way out of this mess.

- 348 Hyperion Avenue, Metropolis -

Reluctant though she was to admit it, Lois realised that the 'romantic interlude' she and Conor had faked at the Planet that morning had helped her to relax in his company and had banished much of her resentment of him. She supposed that at some subconscious level she might have suspected, or feared, that he would want to take Clark's place, and as such she had been ready to resist any such moves. But Conor did not want to do that; it was plain to her now that he wanted to get back to his own world, and to his fiancée, as much as she wanted Clark back. Conor was nothing like the Clark from the other alternate universe; although Lois was fond of that Clark, she had been alarmed when he had stepped over the invisible line between a friend who was helping out, and someone who was trying to muscle in on Clark's territory. Twice that Clark had pleaded with Lois to love him; it had been clear that he was so lonely, so alone, in his own world, and at the time there had been no Lois Lane in that world.

She remembered HG Wells' comment that the other Clark had now found the Lois of his own world, and briefly she felt pleased for him. He didn't deserve to be alone and unhappy.

Conor, on the other hand, had everything he wanted in his own world, and Lois knew now that she had no need to protect herself, or Clark's interests, from him. He was no predator; he had no wish to usurp Clark's position. From something he had said over the lunch they had shared in a sandwich bar, it was clear that he understood perfectly her fears on the subject: he had remarked that, Tempus aside, it was just as well that Jon was staying with the Kents for the time being, since it wouldn't be fair to confuse the child. Lois suspected that Conor had also felt that it would not be fair to Clark for him to spend time with Jon.

Back in the newsroom that afternoon, Conor had surprised her still further. They had agreed that they had to behave as Lois and Clark would normally, which meant getting each other coffees, touching affectionately any time they passed each other, and giving each other long, loving glances. Surprisingly enough, this hadn't been difficult, Lois now realised. Conor had made it easier for her by, over lunch, teaching her a few techniques used by experienced actors when performing romantic or erotic scenes for the cameras. Reminding herself continually that it was all pretence had helped enormously.

But towards the end of the afternoon, they had been seated together at Clark's desk going through the details of a profile Lane and Kent had been writing for the Saturday edition, when one of the Planet's travel writers had approached. Carl had spoken to Conor on the pretext of asking his opinion of Peru, a country which he knew Clark had visited. It was obvious to Lois that Conor had never been to Peru in his life, but he had maintained a reasonably convincing conversation with Carl for a few minutes before the older man had wandered off again.

Lois had thrown Conor an apologetic glance. "Sorry about that - it's

just... well...." She had trailed off with a grimace, unsure of how to continue.

He had given her a conspiratorial grin. "No problem. Let me guess - he fancies Clark?"

Lois had stared at him. "Well, yes... I mean, most people around here know that, but you wouldn't believe how long it took for Clark to realise.... He just hasn't a clue about how attractive he is, and he had no idea Carl's gay."

Conor had laughed aloud, causing a number of heads to turn in their direction; he had fended off the attention by pretending to share a joke with Lois before returning to the original subject. "He's a bit... well, not exactly worldly, isn't he?" he had murmured with an amused smile. "Not that there's anything wrong with that, of course!" he had added quickly before Lois could take offence. Not that she had been going to; she agreed with Conor on that score.

And now they were about to travel to Smallville to see Jon; Lois had called Jonathan and Martha to let them know they could expect visitors in about half an hour. She was still a little unsure about flying with Conor, however: no matter how relaxed she had become in his company, she was still about to fly several hundred miles in his arms - the arms of a man who looked exactly like this world's Superman, a man with whom Lois had flown hundreds of times. Still, she wanted - needed - to see Jon, and unless she wanted to fly by conventional means, she was going to have to let Conor take her.

If Lois had only realised it, Conor was no more looking forward to the flight than she was. He didn't particularly relish the prospect of carrying Lois in his arms for the duration of such a long journey, for one thing: she did look, and sound, too like Laura, and he was really missing his fiancée now. But he was also very nervous at the prospect of meeting Jonathan and Martha Kent. If things had gone as planned, the Kents of his world would have been his parents, and he already felt envious of Clark's evidently happy childhood.

He wondered idly whether the Kents would also physically resemble the actors who had played them in the show; so far, all of the familiar characters from the TV show had resembled their real-life counterparts. It seemed very strange that this should be the case, particularly as, in some cases, there were real-life counterparts in his world as well. Martha and Jonathan Kent, for instance, had existed, but had died a few years earlier. If Clark's parents looked like the show's actors, had the real Kents in Conor's world also looked like these Kents?

He shook his head; all this alternate universe stuff was difficult enough to cope with, without figuring out the added complication of Clark Kent's life being mirrored in the Marner Sisters TV show. Right now, he had to focus on taking Lois to Smallville to see her son. He wondered wryly whether he would be allowed to see young Jon Kent; although he was very conscious of all the reasons why it would be sensible for the child not to see *him*, he did like the idea of seeing the child he and Laura might have in the future.

Time to go, he realised, as Lois came down the stairs dressed in a warm jacket and holding a small bag. He quickly spun into his Superman outfit and turned to her. "You'd better tell me the best way

to make a discreet exit."

- Smallville, Kansas -

Conor landed softly in the dark shadows of the yard behind the Kents' house, thinking with irony of their visit to the Smallville of his world just two days earlier. He had never imagined, at that point, that he would be visiting what he thought of as the real Kent farmhouse; but then, neither had he imagined that he would be living in Metropolis, masquerading as Clark Kent. He was only just getting used to the reality of being Superman, a character he had played on TV; now he was also having to play, for real, the other half of the Clark Kent persona.

He allowed Lois to slide to the ground, gratefully relinquishing his grasp of her. Avoiding her questioning gaze, he studied the house in front of him uncertainly; he was half-tempted to suggest to Lois that he should go flying for an hour or so and return to pick her up later. Although he had no doubt that Clark's parents were nice people and would make him welcome, he felt sure that they would not be too happy to have him there while their son was missing. He was reluctant to make them uncomfortable, and he desperately searched for the words to explain his feelings to Lois.

But she gave him no opportunity, instead catching his arm and urging him forward. "Come on, Conor, it's cold out here!"

Conor needn't have worried; the Kents were very welcoming despite their obvious fears for their own son's safety. Jonathan and Martha exclaimed at the likeness to Clark, which led Conor to explain sheepishly that he didn't normally wear glasses; he immediately removed the pair of Clark's glasses which he still wore.

Lois, after exchanging greetings and hugs with her parents-in-law, hurried upstairs to Clark's old bedroom where Jon was sleeping in Clark's old crib. Martha caught Conor glancing towards the stairs once or twice during their conversation about Lois and Clark's visit to Conor's world, and smiled.

"Would you like to see Jon, Conor?"

Conor stilled. "Yeah, I would... but I didn't want to intrude. And the last thing I want is to upset Lois by having Jon think I'm his dad."

"He's got a point there, Martha," Jonathan interjected.

"I don't think Lois would feel you're intruding, Conor," Martha assured him warmly. "And as for Jon thinking you're Clark, well... he should be asleep now, so it shouldn't arise."

Conor glanced towards the stairs again, as his super-hearing picked up the sounds of light footsteps. A short while later Lois strolled into the kitchen, murmuring softly to her son as she walked. She held Jon balanced on her hip, and he was very much awake. For an instant, Conor contemplated excusing himself to go and wait outside; before he could do so, however, he felt Martha Kent's hand on his arm. He shot her a surprised glance, wondering how she had guessed his intention.

His attention was caught then by the little boy in Lois's arms; even without the shock of black hair he would have known that this was Clark's son. Jon Kent had turned his wide brown eyes on Conor and was simply staring at him with a limpid expression. His heart in his mouth, Conor waited with dread for the child to call him 'Da-Da' or something similar, and for Lois to be angry or upset as a result.

But to his surprise, Jon's mouth curved into a curious smile before he turned back to his mother. "Man!" he chuckled before punching Lois's arm with his pudgy hand.

Conor couldn't help it; he gasped and stared at Martha. She smiled back at him. "I thought that might happen. Jon knows his daddy, and he knows you're not Clark."

Lois sat on the chair Jonathan pulled out for her, and handed Jon across to his grandmother. "I wondered what Jon would think," she said softly. "I think I half-expected he'd know Conor's not Clark, but that's because I know I'd never confuse the two of them."

Conor turned to watch Jon, now being bounced on Martha's lap; the little boy continued to eye him with open curiosity. The resemblance to Clark was amazing, Conor thought: not just the hair and the eyes, but the shape of the jaw and nose as well. There was also a strong hint of Lois in Jon's smile, though; Conor found himself wondering whether a child of his and Laura's might look anything like this adorable little toddler. He and Laura hadn't yet talked about the possibility of children, and he suddenly realised that he wasn't even sure whether Laura wanted kids. But he hoped she did... the thought of, one day, having a son of his own was very appealing.

He wasn't aware of the yearning in his expression until Martha smiled at him again. "Would you like to hold him, Conor?"

Taken aback, Conor instinctively looked at Lois for permission; she waved her hand lightly in acquiescence. Clearly she wasn't concerned; the fact that Jon had not confused him with his father had reassured her. He held out his arms and lifted Jon from Martha's lap to his own, cuddling the little boy against his chest. Jon seemed quite content to be there, chattering away to himself in some incomprehensible language as the adults around him carried on their own conversation.

For Lois, the visit to Smallville helped her more than she could have imagined. Jonathan Kent's quiet strength, and Martha's faith in her son, gave Lois the mental courage she needed to carry on believing that Clark would find a way back to her. The Kents were, of course, very concerned about the possibility that Tempus was behind the separation of Clark from Lois, and Conor from Laura, and they vowed to watch Jon extremely carefully. Lois was also very touched that Conor urged the Kents to call him at once if anything happened about which they were concerned.

As she and Conor were leaving, after she had gone upstairs to say a final goodnight to Jon, Lois noticed a suspicious brightness in Conor's eyes as he escorted her out into the back yard. It occurred to her that he had seemed very surprised and gratified at the warm

and friendly welcome which he had received from Clark's parents, and again she was reminded about this man's very different childhood. And yet he had still grown up to be his world's Superman; a Superman not too dissimilar from Clark, in spite of Clark's suggestion that some of Conor's 'ethics' were a little different.

He was still a man who freely gave up his own time and his abilities to help people in distress or to assist the emergency services. She had, over lunch, asked about the incident which had called him away from the Planet that morning; his response, that he had gone to rescue someone who was being mugged, and had then assisted at a freeway pile-up, had convinced Lois that Conor was no different from Clark in respect of his need to 'help'. It was all part of their need, their desire, to *belong,* a need they both shared.

- California, An Alternate Universe -

Clark was feeling very frustrated; not only was there no sign of Tempus fulfilling his threat - and thereby possibly affording Clark at least a chance of getting back to his own world - but he had very little with which to fill in his time. Laura had been out with her mother for several hours on the previous day, and today she had been out since dawn to fulfil a filming commitment in respect of her current movie project.

Neither had there been much call on Superman's time. So Clark had spent most of the time on his own, either out flying or wandering around Conor and Laura's house; he wasn't very keen on the idea of masquerading as Conor out and about in Beverly Hills or Los Angeles. He supposed, with a wry grimace, that if Conor and Lois were back in Metropolis, Conor would have the advantage that the staff at the Planet looked like the actors who had played them in 'Lois and Clark'. So if Jimmy came up to Conor in the street, for instance, there would at least be a chance that Conor would know who he was.

Clark had watched some more of the videotapes of the TV series, and had also found some other tapes in the video library which included some of the two actors' other work; he had watched some of these with interest, as it had shown that his new friends were indeed very talented actors. He had also - having asked Laura's permission - made use of Conor's computer. The script Conor was working on looked fascinating, Clark thought, and the notes for a novel which he had stumbled across also seemed to represent exciting work. So much for Lois dismissing these two actors as superficial and talentless, he thought; although to be fair, she had reassessed this view within a fairly short time of meeting the actors.

He *missed* Lois. So much.... He never could have imagined that he would feel so lost without her, even though he had frequently commented that his life had been meaningless before he had met her. At the bleakest point of the night which had just passed, he had asked himself whether it would have hurt more if Lois was dead. At least in this situation he knew - or at least he had to believe - that she was alive, somewhere. If she had been dead, he would not even have that comfort. And yet, being separated from her like this, with who knew what chance of seeing each other again, was almost

worse than being separated by death, in a way. At least when someone died, it was possible to mourn, to grieve and to learn to live again without that special person. With what Tempus had done, such grief wasn't possible; only frantic worry, desperate frustration and aching misery.

Perhaps at last he understood how Lois had felt when he had left her to go with the New Kryptonians, he mused. She had known that he was leaving, while he had had no prior knowledge of Tempus's trick; yet that would have made little difference. When he had left with Zara and Ching, none of them had known when, if ever, he would return. And yet Lois had been forced to face going on with her normal life without her fiancé, having to explain Clark's absence to friends and family who did not, could not, know the truth.

Of course, he had also been hurt, distressed, frantic at their separation then. But he had been the one travelling - as he had thought - to the home planet of his fellow Kryptonians, and so he had had other things on his mind. Not least the question of how he was to deal with a marriage he certainly did not want! He had missed Lois; but her grief and distress had been far worse.

And it had been a similar situation for her when Tempus had managed to send him into infinity. For quite some time after that had happened, he had been completely unaware of his surroundings, or of what had happened to him; when he had come to his senses and realised that he was trapped in that tiny segment of space and time, he had of course been frightened, distressed, grief-stricken for the relationships he had left behind him. But again Lois had been forced to carry on, pretending to live a normal life, fighting Tempus and consoling his parents, all the time putting on a brave face to cover up her fear of never seeing her husband again.

He sighed heavily now, admitting to himself that - always assuming he found a way to reunite himself and Lois, and Laura and Conor - the experience could be beneficial to him in some respects at least. He would never again be tempted to minimise in his own mind Lois's suffering in the past.

He got up from Conor's desk abruptly, having lost interest in the computer. Before going out that morning Laura had passed him a set of car-keys, telling him that he should feel free to use Conor's car if he wanted to go out anywhere 'as yourself rather than as Superman,' she had explained. Although they were both aware that Clark could not possibly go anywhere in the wider Los Angeles area as himself, or even as an anonymous visitor, Laura seemed reluctant to acknowledge the fact that he was having to pretend to be Conor. He realised that this was perfectly understandable; he would find it equally abhorrent if he had to pretend to other people that Laura was Lois.

Still.... He *was* bored, and since he didn't want to go out in the Suit again, perhaps there would be no harm in taking Conor's car for a drive up into the mountains. Having made that decision, Clark quickly headed for the garage, whereupon he stopped short on seeing Conor's car.

A gleaming black BMW 5-series convertible.... He swallowed. If Jimmy could see this, the young photographer would be hugely envious. These cars were very rare, being imports and very expensive at that. Clark had driven BMWs before, when he'd spent time in Europe, but never one

as sleek and sporty as this model. Determined to make the most of it, he backed the car out of the garage, operated the automatic gate mechanism, and headed for the hills.

Lois would tell him that he was acting like a little kid, he thought while the wind ruffled his hair as he sped along taking sharp bends at a safe, but fast, speed. 'You're pretending you're in a James Bond movie,' she would accuse him; well, perhaps he was, but it was only for a few short hours. And it helped to take his mind off the fact that he was missing Lois very much. And Jon: he hoped that she had managed to see their son, partly because he knew that she would also be missing him, but also because it wasn't fair that Jon should suffer the absence of both his parents because of Tempus's behaviour.

The car-phone then sounded, interrupting his train of thought; he hesitated before deciding to answer it. It was Laura, inviting him to visit the set of her movie; she was about to have a break in filming and would be free for a couple of hours. It would give them an opportunity to talk, to discuss any suggestions either of them might have about finding a way out of their problem. They would be virtually alone, she assured him; the crew and other cast members would be busy with scenes for which she wasn't needed.

Well, it gave him something to occupy his mind; it would allow less time for these depressing thoughts. He turned the car around and drove in the direction of Burbank.

- 348 Hyperion Avenue, Metropolis -

It had been a long day, Conor reflected tiredly as he let himself in through the back door of the Kent household at around 10.30 pm. He had certainly been used to long days as an actor, but pretending to be a journalist - and going out on the beat with Lois, tracking down stories, conducting interviews and doing research - was a much harder job than he had imagined. Of course, his second job was also taking up a considerable amount of time, he conceded as he glanced down at the rather smoky appearance of his Super suit. Putting out a bush fire does have this effect, he reminded himself with a wry grimace.

Lois got to her feet as he padded through to the sitting-room; he glanced in her direction and then looked away as he caught sight of the dried tears on her cheeks. She was taking the separation very hard, he knew. And it was hardly surprising, after all; the depth of Lois and Clark's love for each other had been very apparent during the couple of days when they had been visiting his home.

He grimaced again; he was also missing Laura so much it hurt, although he had tried to sublimate some of the pain by focusing on activity. Hence he had gone out earlier when he'd heard a bank alarm, even though the details he had overheard on the emergency frequency had suggested that the police could handle the situation. It had occupied half an hour or so; half an hour in which Lois would not have to suffer his company in her home....

If only he could comfort her... but it was not his comfort she wanted. He was the last person from whom she would want friendly

affection, demonstrations of sympathy, whatever.

He gave her a brief wave and gestured towards the upper floor, indicating that he was going to get washed and changed.

Lois watched Conor walk up the stairs with a mixture of relief and guilt. It wasn't fair to him to wish that he wasn't here, she thought; it was hardly his fault. While they were in public, for instance at the Planet, he did a very convincing impersonation of Clark and was openly affectionate, which dispelled any possibility of speculation as to Clark's whereabouts. And he was doing his best to help her as much as possible, by doing things for her as unobtrusively as he could and by staying out of her way when they were alone. She knew that he was going out to be Superman for incidents which Clark probably would have left to the emergency services. Her only concern was that those people who tended to encounter Superman fairly frequently - journalists, some emergency personnel - might notice a difference in 'Superman's behaviour: Conor tended to handle some situations rather differently. Only that afternoon, he had been caught on camera making a rather caustic aside to a police officer about drivers who failed to keep their cars adequately maintained and then cause accidents.

Earlier that evening, he had flown her to Smallville again so that she could see Jon, but after greeting Jonathan and Martha he had excused himself and said that he would come back for her in about an hour. Lois suspected, and Martha had agreed with her, that he had done it in order to give them the privacy to talk openly; Martha had also suggested that perhaps Conor felt that Clark's parents might feel uncomfortable having him around, and had asked Lois to let Conor know that this wasn't the case.

Oh, if Clark was here having Conor around would be no problem at all, Lois mused; in fact, it would be fun. Of course, Conor would not be happy unless Laura was there as well....

Damn Tempus and his meddling, she thought for about the hundredth time that day. She *needed* Clark. She ached for his arms around her; she needed him to hold her, to whisper to her that he loved her, that everything would be okay as long as they had each other. She missed him in their bed at night; missed him making slow, passionate love to her, curling her body into his as they slept.

And yes, it was a slow form of torture to spend time with Conor, Clark's double. It *wasn't* Conor's fault, and she was really doing her best not to let him see how much it hurt her to see him instead of Clark. Conor was a nice guy. He was also doing a pretty good job of pretending to be Clark; in fact, he had made fewer mistakes so far than the Clark from the alternate universe had done. That other Clark had deliberately stayed away from the Planet as much as possible, but on the one occasion when he had gone in he had made the mistake of calling Jimmy 'Mr Olsen', completely forgetting that in this world Jimmy Olsen was not the owner of the Planet. Conor, on the other hand, had not slipped up once, although he had confided to Lois on the way home in the Jeep earlier that it was occasionally difficult to resist calling Perry 'Dane', which was apparently the real name of the actor who had played him in the TV show.

But Conor was also showing promise as a reporter. Lois had imagined that, since he was insisting on carrying on a normal life as 'Clark'

in order to allay any suspicion as to Clark's whereabouts, she would have to do most, if not all, of the work. But he was a very quick learner, and had an intuitive, logical brain - notwithstanding his belief that he was lacking in such talents. He had proved on a couple of occasions to be very useful in interview situations, asking innocent-sounding questions in a deceptively innocuous tone which had lulled the subject into giving away valuable information. And of course, like Clark he was able to use super-powers surreptitiously to their advantage.

But his heart wasn't in it. Lois suspected that it wasn't just that Conor was missing Laura; unlike Clark and herself, he didn't have any burning desire to be a journalist. Now a writer, definitely; from something she had caught sight of that afternoon on Clark's computer screen before Conor had been able to pull up the screensaver, it looked as if he was using some of their experiences as the basis for a novel. A very well-written one, as well, she thought; far better than her own half-baked efforts.

She heard him coming back down the stairs and made a careful effort to compose herself, but in fact it wasn't necessary since he only glanced at her briefly before saying that he was going to get a drink, offering to get her one at the same time. She declined, thanking him, and returned to staring at the TV.

In the kitchen, Conor poured himself coffee and leaned against the island worktop to drink it, brooding on the situation as he did so. Lois was desperately missing Clark, that he could tell. She was also, pretty obviously, worried about him. Although the most logical answer was to assume that Clark and Laura were still in Conor's universe, since they had no proof that this was the case it was difficult to be optimistic.

An idea occurred to him then and, cursing himself for not trying it sooner, he began to concentrate.

- Santa Monica, An Alternate Universe -

Clark stretched again before standing up; pleasant as it was lounging by the pool, he was beginning to feel over-indolent. Laura had prepared a light supper which they could eat al fresco on the patio, and they had talked yet again about their predicament, searching for possible solutions. It seemed to Clark, however, that they were just going around in circles.

It was certainly another indication of how like Lois Laura was, he thought: they shared a terrier-like tenacity. Laura refused to believe that there was nothing she and Clark could do to get Conor back; she persisted in arguing that there must be a way to get hold of HG Wells, or an interdimensional transport, or simply some portal which would take Clark back to Metropolis and Conor home to this universe. He tried to share Laura's optimism; heck, it was sure better than his middle-of-the-night bleak pessimism which assured him that he would never see Lois again. But he really could not think of any means of achieving the desired outcome.

And, of course, it was not just Lois; he also missed being with his son, Jon, and it was hard to come to terms with that loss. Jon was

growing so fast; Clark hated to think that his child would be learning new words, doing different things, while he was not there to see it. Even worse was the thought that perhaps Conor was there to share the experience - and that Jon might be calling Conor 'Da-da' instead of him.

And there was his parents... the two other people with whom Clark could be truly himself. With Jonathan and Martha there was no need to pretend, to suppress his abilities, to wear glasses as if he really was short-sighted - although, to be fair, he wasn't wearing glasses here. In this world, the only person who knew that he was really a super-powered alien from Krypton was Laura - who, understandably, didn't really want to talk to him about what all that entailed, or really to acknowledge the fact of his abilities, because it was too much of a reminder of her own fiancé.

Laura had returned inside some time earlier, saying something about the need to go over her lines for the following day's filming. Clark had, momentarily, wondered if he should offer to coach her, but had decided that he would really prefer some time on his own. Not that his own company was doing him much good at the moment.... Perhaps he needed to change into the Suit and go flying, he thought.

He walked slowly towards the far end of the grounds, barely noticing the twilight shadows falling from the foliage to the grass. Nocturnal birds were starting to chirrup, but he was oblivious to their sounds; all he could think about was Lois. But... what was that? He stilled suddenly. Something... someone... was calling to him.

He frowned. Where was that voice coming from?

And whose voice was it? It sounded... vaguely familiar.

He strained to hear, to focus on exactly what it was which was reaching out to him. Without realising it, he subconsciously opened his mind to the voice trying to contact him.

< < Clark? Clark, can you hear me?>>

Clark started. *Now* he knew what it was! < < Conor?>> I don't believe this, he thought incredulously. He's reaching me through telepathic communication.... He focused, and sent his answer back.

< < Conor, where are you? Is Lois with you?>>

The voice in his head came back. < < Clark - it's good to hear you. I had *no idea* whether this would work. Yes, Lois is here, and we're in your Metropolis. But what about you... and Laura?>>

Instantly supplying the reassurance he knew his counterpart needed, Clark replied silently < < Yes, she's okay. Missing you, and desperate to get you back.>>

< < But where the *hell* are you?>> Conor's voice demanded in response; Clark could somehow sense the tension in his counterpart's body.

< < Sorry... we thought you'd realise. We got left behind - we're back in California now.>>

< < So where's HG Wells? Why hasn't he taken you back?>> Conor seemed incredulous; Clark supposed that it was understandable, given that he and Lois had probably not been aware of everything which had happened on that beach.

< < Tempus took him away - you did realise this is Tempus's doing?>>

The response was swift and angry. < < Lois figured it out. If I could get my hands on that....>>

Clark walked back to the seats by the pool area; this cross-universe telepathy, apart from being a tremendous shock, seemed to require a lot of mental effort. He strained to *sense* Conor, as well as hear him, and got quite a shock.

< < You're in the kitchen of our house!>> For an instant, it was almost as if Clark was there with Conor; no, not with him, *in* him. Inside his head....

< < Yeah>> Conor answered. < < I could feel you in my head just then... this telepathy stuff is really weird!>>

There was silence for a few moments, and Clark was afraid that something might have happened to break the 'connection', whatever it was which was allowing them to communicate with each other across dimensions. Although... he could still sense Conor's presence somehow. But then, just as he was about to 'speak' again, he felt Conor's voice in his head.

< < Do you want to do a 'Ghost', Clark?>>

< < What??>> Clark couldn't understand what Conor was getting at.

< < Come on, you've seen the movie, haven't you? What Patrick Swayze did with Whoopi Goldberg's body.>> Conor's tone was faintly impatient, as if he believed that his counterpart should have been aware of what he'd been suggesting.

Clark stilled. Was that possible? Could he... somehow use Conor's body? Or, at least, travel in his mind so far into Conor's thoughts that he would, somehow, be there in Metropolis? He concentrated all of his energies onto that possibility, focusing, projecting...

... and suddenly he was looking around at the kitchen of his own home. No, he wasn't really, he realised; what he was sensing was Conor's own view of his surroundings. Clark's consciousness had somehow become a part of Conor's.

< < I don't believe this!>> he whispered; he shifted his mental focus downwards, and the body he saw was Conor's; the clothes his own.

< < Yeah, it's pretty amazing, isn't it>> his counterpart replied; Clark could feel the range of emotions Conor was experiencing. Shock, disbelief, excitement, pain; they were all mingled together, and Clark realised for the first time that Conor had been suffering through this separation from his soul-mate in much the same way as he himself had.

But there were more urgent things to concentrate on....

< < Where's Lois?>> he demanded immediately.

< < Through here. Come on.>>

- 348 Hyperion Avenue, Metropolis -

Lois finally gave up trying to concentrate on the late-night news, instead staring guiltily at the door leading to the kitchen and wondering whether she should make an attempt to go and talk to Conor. She was just about to get to her feet when the door swung open suddenly and Conor emerged into the sitting-room; he strode quickly over to her and sat on the sofa beside her, turning his body so that he was looking straight at her.

"Lois? Lois, there's something I need to... you may find this difficult to accept...."

< < No, she won't!>> Clark told Conor impatiently. < < Lois is used to all sorts of weird things - just tell her! Or let me...>>

< < Okay, Clark, this is your show. I'll take a back seat from here on.>> Conor's tone, to Clark, seemed resigned; Clark half-suspected that his counterpart wasn't enjoying this experience. But Clark had no intention of calling a halt at this stage. Through Conor's eyes, he saw Lois curled up on the sofa, saw the pain, sadness and guilt in her eyes, and desperately wanted to touch her. But... she didn't yet know what was going on. He thought quickly, wondering how best to broach the subject.

Lois, watching Conor closely, saw him give a deep sigh. Puzzled, she began to wonder just what was going on. Then she was thoroughly taken by surprise as he reached out and took both her hands in his.

"Conor! Just what do you think you're doing?!"

"Lois, listen to me," came the reply. "Do you remember telling me that you should have known... as soon as you looked into my eyes...?"

Lois gave a tiny choke as she stared disbelievingly at the man sitting so close to her. It couldn't be... it *was* Conor, she could easily tell him apart from Clark. To her, the two men were not identical. And yet... what he had said: only Clark could know about that!

But.... "Clark?" she whispered questioningly, her voice almost cracking.

"Yes," came the soft, murmured reply.

"But... how?"

The hands holding hers tightened. "Lois... sweetheart... it's telepathy. I'm talking to you through Conor's mind."

She gasped, barely able to comprehend the possibility of such a thing. "So... while I'm sitting next to Conor, holding his... hands, I'm talking to you?" A lump formed in her throat as she spoke.

"More or less," Conor/Clark confirmed. "We don't know how it works either, just that Conor was able to contact me. And I can... send thoughts into his mind, and if he allows me to, I can virtually take over his impulses - which is what I'm doing now."

< Yeah, right> Lois thought. < And if I told anyone else about this I'd get carted off to the funny farm.>

But she continued to stare at Conor. He held her gaze unashamedly, then said softly, "Lois, I know this sounds fantastic, but it's happening. I'm sitting by the pool at Laura and Conor's house, and yet I'm able to talk to you."

"Do you hear me talking to you?" she asked, incredulous.

He nodded. "It's sort of... hazy, a little out of focus, as if it's coming from far away. You see, I'm not really there, with you - it's just my mind is somehow with Conor's."

This was so *weird*, Lois thought. But... she remembered another incident... it was no less weird than the time when Clark was trapped inside Woody Samms' body. She had known it was Clark then, once she'd understood what had happened. She freed one hand and reached out, tentatively, to caress his face.

- Santa Monica, An Alternate Universe -

This was absolutely incredible, Clark thought as he somehow 'felt' the brush of Lois's hands over his face. It was not his face she was caressing; it was Conor's. And yet somehow in his imagination, or in his sub-conscious, he felt that caress. It was not quite real, but not quite a dream either. Concentrating, he made Conor's hand tighten around the hand of Lois's his counterpart still held.

< < Lois? Sweetheart, are you okay?>>

"Yes, I'm... fine," she replied shakily. "I miss you - we all miss you. Martha, Jonathan, little Jon... we want you home again."

< < Jon - where is he?>> Clark's anxiety obviously transferred itself, since Lois instantly reassured him that their son was with his parents and was being very thoroughly spoilt.

"And Clark... you should be proud of him. He knew Conor wasn't you."

Clark was well aware that he had no right to be so relieved; after all, he knew that Conor was not trying to take his place in Metropolis and with Clark's family. Conor was simply making the best of a difficult situation, and was helping Lois in the same way as Clark would try to help Laura if the need arose. But he couldn't help his feelings.

< < Lois, you know it was Tempus, don't you? I'm just worried in case he comes after you and Jon.>>

"I know - that's why we left Jon in Smallville. And Conor says he can get there in seconds if anything happens."

Clark swallowed. What if seconds wasn't quick enough? But Lois was now asking him what had happened to him. He quickly explained what had happened on the beach, and summarised events since - not that there had been much to tell really.

"Oh God, Clark, I miss you!" Lois choked out. His heart turned over. Focusing through Conor's eyes, he saw the tears flow down her face, and he concentrated; he needed to hold her. He willed Conor's arms to reach out and enfold her; as Conor did so, Clark felt the vicarious pleasure of holding his wife in his arms again.

He wanted to kiss her, so badly; but he was conscious that it would not be *him* kissing her. Unlike the previous occasion of which he had reminded her, he had not swapped bodies with Conor. It was Conor, not Clark, who was holding Lois; Clark was merely sharing Conor's mind for a brief period through their telepathic abilities. Reluctantly, he withdrew slightly so that he could sense Conor's thoughts again as well as his own. Instantly, he became aware that his counterpart did feel a little uncomfortable.

< < Okay, Conor, it's all yours again.>>

He felt Conor's relief at the same time as he realised the younger man was getting up from the sofa. He heard Conor say that he would come and talk to Lois again in a little while; he heard Lois's surprised, shaky voice say, questioningly, "Conor?" and felt Conor nod. Then he was alone with his counterpart.

Conor was flying; Clark recognised that quite quickly as he realised that he could sense the swift flow of cool night air. He sighed deeply, and asked his counterpart, < < Are you okay?>>

< < Yeah>> came the soft reply. < < I'm sorry - but it was kind of difficult for me.>>

< < I realise that>> Clark assured him. < < And I'm very grateful you let me do it.>> He paused, then added, < < I guess it's hard for you since Lois looks so like Laura.>>

< < Well, that must be the same for you!>> came the accusing reply.

< < Sure, but Laura is out at work a lot of the time, so I don't see her as much as you do Lois - if you're pretending to be me, that is.>>

< < I am>> Conor answered. < < And I've pretty much got away with it so far, though it was a bit of a close call today when Jimmy asked me where Jon is - I nearly said 'the Kents' instead of 'Mom and Dad'.>>

< < But you covered?>> Clark asked anxiously.

< < Yeah, no problems,>> Conor assured him. < < Look, I know how

important it is that no-one has any reason to be suspicious of you.>>

< < It's not that>> Clark quickly answered. < < Jimmy's a good friend, that's all. I wouldn't want him hurt by finding out... something... by accident.>>

< < Like Clark Kent is really Superman?>> Conor replied. < < He won't find that out from me, trust me on that. I'll leave that one to you to tell him, if you think the time is right. And I like Jimmy - he's a nice guy. I'm doing my best to behave like he expects 'CK' to, and I think he's convinced. So far, that is.>>

< < Good.>> Clark paused, knowing what he should now offer to do but somehow reluctant to say it, although he wasn't quite sure why - after all, Conor had done it for him. Why was he hesitating...? But Conor beat him to it.

< < My turn now.>> His counterpart's tone was quiet but insistent. < < Where's Laura?>>

< < Inside the house, going over her lines. Come on.>>

- Santa Monica, An Alternate Universe -

Laura threw down her script; she just wasn't concentrating tonight and it would show in the morning when she wasn't word-perfect on set. But thoughts of Conor kept invading her mind. She missed him terribly and desperately wanted to know where he was, if he was safe, when he was coming home to her. And yet, at the same time, she kept getting the bizarre impression that he was somehow close at hand.

< That's ridiculous!> she told herself. < It's Clark I'm thinking about; he looks and sounds so like Conor I'm starting to get them confused.>

Just then she heard footsteps outside Conor's study. She braced herself: it would be Clark. There was a tap on the door, then he hesitantly asked for permission to enter. She closed her eyes briefly, unsure whether she really wanted to speak to him but reminding herself that he was really her only remaining link to Conor. And maybe she did need his company, the comfort of his presence. If only looking at him wasn't so painful....

He came in, treading softly and looking almost as if he would prefer to be anywhere else than there. Something seemed to be making him distinctly uncomfortable.

He took a seat several feet from her, brushing his hand awkwardly through his hair. "Laura..." he began hesitantly.

"What is it, Clark?" she asked, trying to be encouraging.

"Um... well, do you remember Conor telling you that he and I are able to talk telepathically?"

Laura's breath caught in her throat. Yes, she remembered - what did

this mean?

"Clark?" she whispered shakily. "Are you saying... are you able to contact Conor? Do you know where he is?"

"Well... actually, he contacted me," Clark admitted. "I didn't think of it."

Laura smiled involuntarily; despite Conor's feelings of inferiority next to Clark, he had actually had the presence of mind to try something which hadn't occurred to Clark. She was taken aback when Clark responded to her, even though she hadn't spoken her thoughts aloud.

"He's pretty smart," Clark observed with a wry smile. "And only the other day I was wishing he'd believe in himself more."

Laura brushed the thought aside to deal with later. "So - you've had contact with him? How is he? - and Lois," she added as an afterthought.

Clark smiled again, this time an odd sort of awkward half-smile. "How about I let him tell you himself?"

She started, her eyes widening. "What do you mean?"

Clark paused before speaking again; his eyes closed briefly. "It's sort of hard to explain, but I can relax, shut down my own thought processes, and let his take over - then he can be here, in spirit, sort of."

Laura frowned as she tried to assimilate this. It sounded like something out of a sci-fi TV show; she was sure that numerous script-writers in and around Hollywood would have no difficulty with the concept. But in real life...? Her Conor, communicating with her through this man's mind and voice?

On the other hand, it was no stranger than the fact that this man, Clark, *was* in fact Conor, but from another universe. And the fact that he and Conor could communicate telepathically in the first place. *And*, of course, the ultimate fact of Conor's being an alien from another planet. Any of these little details would be very much at home in a sci-fi novel or TV show. It was just a little hard to accept them in real life... but on the other hand, why should she not believe it? It was no more far-fetched than believing that a man could fly, and after all, she had been the one to realise, first, just what Conor could do, that day he had saved their lives in the TV studio.

"So - you're saying Conor can speak to me, using your voice?"

Clark nodded. "That's about it. But he's getting kind of impatient, so I'll just hand you over...."

Laura watched, holding her breath, as Clark leaned his head back and closed his eyes. A moment or two later, he opened them again and spoke. "Laura?"

She hesitated, then replied doubtfully, "Conor?"

< < Yes, it's me, sweetheart.>> The words came from Clark's mouth, but somehow Laura *knew* - it was Conor.

"Conor - oh, Conor, where are you? Are you okay?"

< < Yes, I'm fine - just missing you. Missing you more than I ever thought possible.>>

She leaned towards Clark/Conor, and clutched at his hand. "Do you feel that, sweetheart? Can you tell I'm holding you?"

< < Yes, just about - I can sense it, sort of. I'm not really there with you, it's just that I can transmit my thoughts and feelings into Clark's mind. It's a bit like watching you through a camera lens in long-shot, though I can kind of feel things - I think that's Clark transmitting what he feels over to me. If you can understand any of that - I know it sounds pretty weird!>>

It does, Laura thought, but it wasn't something she was planning on arguing over - all that mattered was that she and Conor were able to talk to each other. "So you and Lois are okay?"

< < Yeah, though she's missing Clark as much as I miss you, and that's hard. I'm pretending to be Clark so that no-one here notices anything out of the ordinary - I just hope I'm doing okay.>>

Laura smiled wryly. "Well, you played him on TV for more than a year - it's not as if you haven't had practice!"

Clark/Conor smiled. < < Yeah, I guess. But don't forget Clark's a lot older now than the version of him I played!>>

"How can I get you back here?" Laura asked, her voice almost letting her down. Unbidden, tears sprang to her eyes. The man sitting opposite her leaned towards her and extended a hand to brush them away; she gripped his hand and held it against her face.

< < We're working on it. Now that Clark and I can communicate, maybe we can work out a way of getting us swapped back again. Don't cry, honey - I'm coming home to you, I promise.>>

Now that she had given way to them, the tears continued to fall; if Laura had thought it was hard to be with Clark, who looked so like Conor but was not her fiancé, it was doubly difficult to communicate with Conor in this manner. She wanted to be wrapped within his arms; to go flying with him; to be reassured of his love and devotion; to have him beside her.

< < Laura, sweetheart, don't do this!>> he pleaded with her. < < It *will* be all right. I'll be back to you as soon as I can.>>

"I wish I could be as strong as you, my love," she murmured sadly. "It's just so hard...."

< < Laura, my darling, you are the strongest woman I know!>> he assured her. < < You know I never would have survived as Superman without you. And I never would have admitted to being what... who I am if you hadn't made me face it that day we had the accident at the studio. Just trust in us - you know we were meant to be together, HG Wells told us so. That means *nothing* can keep us apart.>>

"Not even a crazed villain from the future?" Laura replied, smiling in spite of herself.

< < Not even him. Laura Lindsay, I love you.>>

"I love you too, Conor Kane." Laura stretched out her hand and caressed his face, only to see the man in front of her blink slightly before a vaguely uncomfortable expression crossed his face. She frowned. "Clark?" Her tone was hesitant, disappointed.

He grimaced. "Yeah. Sorry, Laura - I don't know what happened, but he just seemed to - disappear - suddenly." He straightened in his seat and, embarrassed, she withdrew her hand. "Hold on a second," he murmured before closing his eyes. She watched, confused and longing for just one more moment with Conor. She hadn't been ready to let him go....

Clark opened his eyes again and threw her a regretful glance. "Sorry. I can't reach him."

"Why not?" she demanded, crushingly disappointed.

He shook his head. "I have no idea. I never thought we'd be able to do this anyway - not across dimensions. I was absolutely amazed when I heard him calling me earlier. But now, there's just nothing. I can't sense him at all, and I have no idea whether he's blocking communication or whether something else is stopping it." He met her eyes again, his gaze sympathetic. "I know you weren't ready to let him go, and I'm sorry. If I could get him back for you, I would."

She nodded; it was obvious that Clark would do that for her. Struck by a thought suddenly, she asked, "Did you get to talk to Lois?"

He smiled suddenly, his entire expression changing in that instant. "Yeah. She's - she's doing great, though she misses me... I guess it's tough for all of us. But I did manage to tell her and Conor what's going on - about Tempus."

"I'm glad," Laura replied, meaning it. "But - what now?"

Clark shook his head again. "I'm not sure. I wanted to talk to Conor or Lois again, to discuss how we can set this right, but now...." He trailed off helplessly.

On impulse, Laura reached for Clark's hand and curled her fingers around his palm briefly before releasing him. "We'll manage. Hey, he's got Lois helping him, and I've got you - with all four of us on it, we'll find a way to beat Tempus!"

Clark smiled, his eyes echoing the gesture. "Sure we will." He got to his feet. "Can I get you a coffee or something?"

Standing, Laura shook her head. "Would you find it very hard to take me flying?"

She thought that Clark seemed to hesitate, and was about to speak again to tell him to forget it, it was a bad idea. But then he held out his hand to her. "Sure. I'd like that."

As they walked towards the rear of the house, Laura glanced up at Clark; he seemed more relaxed now than he had earlier, and more at ease in her company. This emboldened her to ask the question which had been on her mind since he'd told her about contacting Conor by telepathy.

"Clark - was all of this uncomfortable for you? The telepathy - letting Conor speak to me through your mind, and so on?"

He glanced down at her, his expression wry. "Yeah, it was, a little. You know, I couldn't figure out why at first. I just knew that although I had to offer to let Conor do what I'd already done, I wasn't happy about it. I know now it's that I... well, it felt like I was invading your privacy there."

She frowned, suddenly comprehending. "You saw... heard... what went on? Oh, how stupid - of course you did!" she answered her own question.

"Yes, I did, though it was a really weird sensation," he told her. "It was as if I wasn't in my own body at all, but floating somewhere above myself. I could see and hear what was happening, but as if from a distance."

One of her conversations with Lois sprang to Laura's mind suddenly, and she remembered being told how shy and lacking in confidence this man could be; not like Conor, who in many ways was something of an extrovert. She squeezed his hand, which was still gripping hers lightly. "Clark, you weren't invading anyone's privacy," she assured him softly. "What you *were* doing was giving me a chance to talk to my fiancée, and to let me know that he's safe. That's worth a lot to me, you know that."

"Yeah," Clark replied softly. "And it was worth a lot to me that he did the same for Lois and I."

They had reached the end of the garden; Laura came to a halt and turned to face Clark. He gazed down at her and placed his hands lightly on her shoulders. "I know how hard this has been for you - it's been tough for both of us."

She nodded. "I know - and I haven't been fair to you, Clark. I've been avoiding you, because it's so hard seeing you and knowing you aren't Conor. I've allowed myself to forget that you're going through exactly the same thing."

He smiled sympathetically at her; it seemed in that moment as if they reached a new understanding. He drew her closer to him and for a long moment cradled her body against his, her head tucked into his shoulder. The embrace was similar to the way Conor held her sometimes, but for both of them it was clearly platonic; giving each other comfort and understanding.

As he released her, she met his gaze and said shakily, "Thanks, Clark - I needed that."

"Any time." He smiled at her, then stepped back and spun quickly. Coming to a halt dressed in his Superman costume, he held out his hand again. "Ready to go flying?"

- 348 Hyperion Avenue, Metropolis -

Lois paced the living-room impatiently, wondering where Conor had got to. He had left so abruptly after her conversation with Clark had ended, and she needed to talk to him. Apart from wanting to know everything Conor knew about how Clark was and what he thought they should do in order to get him home, she wanted to know just how aware Conor had been of what had gone on.

Or did she really want to know that? It had been a very strange interlude: to be in the room with one man, and yet really be talking to someone else. To *hold* one man, yet know that someone else was aware of the embrace... did she really want to know how Conor had felt during those few moments?

On the other hand, she was a little disturbed by the fact that he had been gone so long. Was he still talking to Clark? What was going on?

A noise in the kitchen attracted her attention suddenly, and she hurried through in time to see Conor closing the back door behind him. "Where have you been?" she demanded angrily, more anxious than she was prepared to let on.

As he turned to face her, she noticed that he looked exhausted, and that his eyes were not just weary, but sad. Her heart went out to him; she realised that she had been so wrapped up in her own concerns and yearning for Clark that she had forgotten this man's feelings. It suddenly occurred to her to wonder how difficult it had been for him to allow Clark use of his mind and body for those few short minutes. And had Clark done the same for him?

She moved to stand beside him, reaching out tentatively with her hand to touch his arm which was encased in the Spandex of the Super-suit. "Conor? Are you all right?"

His mouth twisted upwards at the corners in what looked like a parody of a smile, but then he met her gaze and his own softened slightly. "Yeah, I guess. Sorry, all this was just kind of difficult."

"Let me get you a drink." Lois offered, but suddenly he was standing in front of the coffee-machine, dressed in Clark's casual clothing again. He filled the machine at super-speed before setting a tray. She didn't speak again immediately because it was apparent from his stance that he was using his coffee-making activities to occupy himself while he regained his composure.

They moved back into the living-room, Conor taking up a seat opposite Lois on the second sofa. She glanced across at him as she picked up her coffee-cup; he still looked weary, but a little less depressed now. He caught her watching him, and his expression relaxed a little.

"Sorry, Lois - I was miles away."

"In another dimension?" she guessed, her tone sympathetic. "Did you manage to speak to Laura?"

He nodded. "Yeah. But we got... cut off, I guess is the only way to describe it. I don't know what happened - I don't think it was Clark. But suddenly I was just... well, kicked out. And I couldn't manage to contact him again."

Lois frowned, trying to remember what Clark had told her about his telepathic abilities. "He wouldn't have blocked you, would he?"

Conor shook his head. "I can't see why. Can you? Anyway, I'd hoped he'd want to talk to me about what we do next, how we get this sorted."

Disappointed, Lois exclaimed, "You mean he didn't?"

Conor shrugged despondently. "We didn't get the chance."

"So what did you talk about?"

Conor sighed. "Once we realised we could talk... basically about what had happened, you know, Tempus - I know Clark told you. And about you and Laura. He wanted to know how you were doing, where we both were." < And then I suggested we do a Ghost> he thought with an inward sigh, wondering whether it had really been such a great idea after all....

"Conor?" Lois's voice interrupted his thoughts. "What's up?"

He shrugged. "I'm fine," he replied abruptly.

Lois ignored the curt response. "Conor, I've known Clark a long time. And you and he are very, very alike in personality as well as looks. When Clark gets that look on his face I know he's obsessing, and the only way we can deal with it is if I get him to talk to me. So... talk!"

He threw her a reluctant smile. "I can see why Clark would do just about anything for you, Lois. You know, I really hope Laura and I can have as great a relationship as you two."

She reached out and touched his hand lightly. "You will. You two are meant to be together, just like Clark and I are."

He turned his palm over and curled his fingers around hers, holding her hand lightly in his. "You're right. There is something bothering me, and it shouldn't." He grimaced before continuing. "All this telepathy stuff... it's new to me, and even when we were all in my world I didn't altogether like the idea that someone else could get inside my head, read my thoughts.... Oh, don't get me wrong," he continued, seeing Lois's concerned expression. "Clark didn't invade my privacy or anything. He was very discreet - I think he just wanted to show me that it could be done, and of course we used it when Laura and I went to that theme park. I just never felt very comfortable with it, though."

He paused, taking a sip of his coffee. "That probably sounds weird when I tell you that I was the one who contacted Clark tonight - but it just occurred to me to try it. Talking to him was fine - it was great, in fact, because at least now we know what's going on."

But...." He paused, glancing at Lois anxiously. "Well, when I let him... talk... to you, that was... one of the weirdest experiences of my life. Even more so than when I realised I could fly."

"I wondered how much you saw, or heard, of it," Lois replied softly.

"Oh, all of it, though it was as if I was kind of watching from above somewhere. Even when you hugged me... him... it didn't altogether feel as if it was my body. But... well, I did feel as if I was invading your privacy, and - I want to apologise. For - breaking things up the way I did. I didn't mean to."

Lois frowned, wondering what Conor meant. He explained. "Well, you guys were hugging, and I could *feel* how much Clark missed you, his love for you... and I felt pretty uncomfortable, like I wished I wasn't there so you two could be alone. And I'm sure he sensed it, so he stopped talking to you."

And *she* had been resentful, that Conor had been the unwanted third during her private conversation with Clark, Lois thought guiltily. It hadn't occurred to her to consider that he might have been embarrassed. But of course he would have been... as would Clark while Conor and Laura had been talking.

But she realised that Conor needed reassurance. "Hey, it's okay. Without you, I wouldn't have been able to talk to Clark at all. And he probably felt the same way when you were talking with Laura, but it really doesn't matter, you know. After all, you are the same person, just from different dimensions." She paused, then added, "Where did you go after Clark stopped talking to me?"

He blinked. "Sorry about that - like I said, I felt kind of embarrassed, and I didn't really feel comfortable around you straight after that. And I wanted to talk to Clark, and to Laura - so I went flying. Then the connection 'dropped' or whatever, and I felt pretty drained, so I went and sat on the roof of the Planet for a bit, just thinking... about Laura, about how the hell I'm going to get back to her. And then I thought I'd better come and see if you were okay."

She smiled. "Yeah, I'm okay. I felt kind of... flat, lonely... at first. It was so weird, talking to Clark like that and then not having him here. But I wouldn't have missed it for the world, Conor, so thank you for letting me be with him."

"Yeah, I know how it feels. It was so good, for those few minutes, to be with Laura again, to hear her voice... but then it ended so abruptly. That upset me, I guess. And this telepathy stuff actually takes it out of you, you know...."

"Actually, no, I don't," Lois told him dryly.

"Well, trust me, it does," he assured her.

"We're both missing our partners," she observed softly. "And I think I haven't exactly been making thing easy for you."

He pulled a face. "It's not your fault, Lois. I know I look exactly like Clark, and it can't be easy for you to see me, be with me all

day long, and hear your friends call me 'Clark'. You have to pretend to kiss me and be affectionate at work because that's how you behave with Clark. And you even have to get me to fly you to see your son."

"You didn't have to leave this evening," Lois told him abruptly.

His mouth turned down at the corners. "I did, Lois. For a number of reasons. I didn't want to upset Clark's parents - or you - and I wanted to give you all some privacy. And although I know Jon realised I wasn't his father I still didn't want to risk confusing him. And..." he hesitated, wondering whether to add his other reason. Lois's expression encouraged him. "Well, Jonathan and Martha are such great people. Clark was really lucky to be adopted by them."

"And that makes you envious? Wishing that HG Wells had never interfered in your world to alter your time-line?"

He shrugged. "A little - although I know that Tempus would have killed me otherwise. I suppose maybe I've wondered occasionally if he couldn't have found another way to save me then - like bringing an older me back to save the baby me, the way it happened in your world. Then I could have had the Kents as my parents."

Lois wondered again just what this man's childhood had been like. Both Laura and Conor had made occasional passing remarks which had indicated that his parents had not been like the Kents, but on the other hand, she didn't have the impression that they had been like her own parents, for example, continually feuding. If anything, it seemed that the Kanes had more or less ignored the boy Conor, apart from insisting that he abide by a number of rigid rules. There must have been a lot of love lacking in that household, Lois decided.

But Conor had other things on his mind, she realised, as he continued with the earlier thread of their conversation. "I *needed* to leave you alone with Clark's parents, Lois. That whole situation is just... well, it's difficult." He averted his eyes from Lois's, instead staring down at his hands. "I'm glad Jon realised I'm not Clark. I just wish there was some way you could have him here with you without me being around. I did think maybe I should leave, find somewhere else to stay - "

Lois caught his hand abruptly. "Conor, that's ridiculous!" She got to her feet, crossing to sit beside him on the other sofa. "Look, I know I was nervous about you meeting him at first, but that was only - "

"I know," he interrupted. "You didn't want him to think that I was Clark, in case it confused him. But, like you said to Clark, he's a very smart little boy - just like his parents, I guess. He knew I wasn't his daddy."

"Yeah. So there's no problem," Lois agreed. "Look, Conor, it would be crazy for you to leave here. And I don't want you to - "

"No?" he enquired tautly. "I know it's been tough on you having me around."

"Yeah, and I know that's why you keep rushing off, even when there's no emergency to go to," Lois replied softly, a note of guilt and apology in her voice. "Conor, you're right, this has been hard for me, even more so since I've been through it before when Tempus sent Clark into infinity and HG brought the other Clark here to help. That was... well, it was a difficult time, and - and something happened which I'm pretty ashamed of, and... and I just really wanted to make sure that it didn't happen with you, and so... well, I wasn't very understanding or sympathetic as a result."

"Something happened?" Conor enquired gently, wondering what Lois meant. She couldn't possibly mean... no, she couldn't...?

Lois saw the fleeting expressions crossing Conor's face and flushed. "No! No, it definitely wasn't.... Look, we kissed. That's all. It was... well, I was missing Clark, and he looked *so* like Clark, even more than you do because you don't wear Clark's glasses around the house and Clark usually wears them at home except in our bedroom, in case we get interrupted... and we'd been having some wine, and I was talking about how much I missed Clark, and he was talking about how lonely his life was because the Lois of his world was missing, and... the next thing I knew we'd kissed. It was only for a second, but... I was *so* embarrassed, and so was he, and... and I didn't want anything like that to happen again, and so I was kind of making sure I kept my distance... and I'm babbling and I hate it when I babble...."

Conor grinned suddenly, his face lighting up and reminding Lois so much of Clark when he was enjoying life, as he so frequently did these days. "Yeah, you sound just like Laura played you sometimes. But honestly, you shouldn't worry about that. Like you said, nothing happened and neither of you wanted anything to happen. And..." he paused, threw her a wry smile, then continued, "Nothing like that would happen with us anyway. From what you and Clark have said, this other Clark was more than half-way in love with you. I'm not - I have Laura, and although you look and sound like her, I know very well you're *not* her. It's as if you're her... sister, maybe. And although *of course* I find you attractive - how could I not, in the circumstances? - there's just no spark there. Just... affection. And a sort of brotherly desire to make sure you're okay, that's all."

Lois laughed. "Brotherly? I've never had a brother... though I do have a sister. Clark likes her - and I think he kind of likes to look out for her, too."

"Yeah?" Conor smiled again. "Lucy, isn't it? Does she - know - about Clark?"

"Yes. She found out about - oh, almost two years ago. She was having some problems, needed somewhere to stay for a few days, and I was away, so she and Clark ended up spending quite a bit of time together. Clark liked having her around because it gave him a chance to get to know her properly. Anyway, he was careless, and she noticed, so he had to tell her the truth. She's been great, though. Apart from occasionally asking him to take her flying, she never mentions it, and we know she'd never tell anyone."

Conor stretched out his long legs in front of him, now looking much more relaxed and at ease with her. "Lois, do you mind if I ask you

something?"

She shrugged. "Sure, go ahead. If it's something I don't want to answer, don't worry, I'll tell you!"

"It's nothing too personal," he assured her earnestly. "It's just... I was wondering about Jon. Do you and Clark think he'll have Clark's powers?"

Lois grimaced. "Oh, we worry about that all the time! Before he was born, I was petrified that he was going to be floating in his crib, and that we'd never be able to leave him with a babysitter or in daycare. But Clark doesn't think Jon will develop any powers until he's almost in his teens, which gives us time to prepare him, I guess. And prepare ourselves," she added wryly.

Conor nodded thoughtfully. "That is something that bothered me a little. I mean, Laura and I haven't really discussed kids yet, but I'd like at least three and I'm pretty sure she's keen." Lois nodded, recalling her conversation with Laura a few days earlier. "Do you and Clark want more?" he asked, then, his expression reddening, added, "Sorry, that was a bit too intrusive. Forget I said it."

Lois shook her head; strangely, while an hour or two earlier she would have done anything rather than have this kind of conversation with Conor, now she was enjoying their closer friendship. "No problem - I don't mind. Yes, we'd like another baby, and preferably in the next year while Jon's still very young. We'd prefer not to have too much gap between them."

"Would you like a girl or a boy next time?"

Lois's mouth creased into a dreamy smile. "Oh, a girl, definitely. I know Clark would love a daughter - and he says that since Jon looks so like him he wants a little girl who looks like me. I know what'll happen!" she added with an amused laugh. "She'd wrap him around her little finger! And I'd like a daughter as well, just... well, because I would." < So that I could give her a better upbringing than I had, a better sense of self-worth > she mused silently, realising that Clark probably understood this even though she had never actually told him.

"So... a little girl next time, maybe," Conor mused aloud, smiling. "Any thoughts on names?"

"Clark likes 'Katherine'," Lois replied thoughtfully. "So maybe 'Katherine Martha Ellen', to keep my Mom happy too... though I guess we'd still end up calling her 'Katy'."

"Hmmm... Katy Kent," Conor drawled with a smile. "Nice."

"'Katy *Lane* Kent', if you don't mind!" Lois insisted. Just then, she noticed a familiar faraway expression on Conor's face; so like Clark, she mused for about the hundredth time since meeting this man. "Go, Conor. If you're late, I'll see you in the morning."

- A mountain-top somewhere above Burbank, An Alternate Universe -

"You are sure you're not cold, Laura?" Clark asked, concerned. "You know I can easily...." He gestured vaguely towards his eyes.

She shook her head. "No, I'm fine. It's a lovely evening." She remained silent for a few moments, her gaze taking in their surroundings and the city far below them. "Thanks for bringing me up here, Clark. It's so peaceful, and such a change from all the craziness that goes on down there."

"Hollywood, you mean?" Clark asked curiously. "It must be an incredibly claustrophobic life - especially now Conor's got the secret identity to maintain as well."

It can be," Laura acknowledged. "But when you're living in that goldfish-bowl, you pretty quickly develop strategies to guard your privacy - like our house, the fencing all around, the security cameras.... We can usually manage to keep the world shut out. We're lucky in that even before Conor and I got together we were both known for being... well, not exactly Hollywood socialites, and neither of us ever courted publicity. Even when we announced our engagement, we just did one press conference to get all the attention over with."

"I couldn't do it," Clark said softly. "It's not just the constant attention, getting recognised - like when I was out in Conor's car earlier today, and someone shouted, 'Hi Conor!'. I'm used to attention, I guess - I get enough of it as Superman, but at least I have my private life as Clark Kent. But although I know you're very good at what you do, Laura, acting wouldn't be for me."

She grinned at him. "I wouldn't make much of a journalist either. But Conor enjoys writing, though he's keener on fiction."

Clark laughed in genuine amusement. "Oh, trust me, Laura - sometimes there's not much difference!"

They fell silent for a few moments; Clark tried again to contact Conor telepathically but had no success. Glancing at Laura, he ventured, "I'm really sorry I couldn't sustain contact with Conor earlier - I know you wanted more time with him."

She smiled reassuringly back at him. "It's not your fault, Clark, and I'm just really glad the two of you were able to contact each other at all. And I'm pleased you got to talk to Lois." She hesitated, glancing at him, the sudden rigid set of his jawline. "I know you miss her too. Do I... do I look very like her?"

Clark swung his upper body around so that he was directly facing Laura. "You look **exactly** like she did when I first fell in love with her," he replied huskily.

"Oh," Laura whispered.

"Hey!" he chivvied her bracingly. "It's okay... it's weird, you know, but I don't have any problem separating the two of you. I know you **look** exactly like her, and sound like her, and you're like her in so many other ways, but now... after what happened earlier, somehow I feel about you like I do about Lois's sister. I mean, I love Lucy,

but like she was my own sister. And I sort of feel that way about you. While Lois... well, she's something else again."

Laura gave him a wobbly smile. "Lucky woman." Seeing Clark's frown in response, she added, "Oh, don't get me wrong. I am **completely** in love with Conor. But in a way, I'm envious of what you two have. You're so **comfortable** together - I mean, with you being Superman as well as Clark, and coping with all the demands that makes of you, and you've got a great kid...." She trailed off suddenly, clapping her hand over her mouth. "Oh Clark!" she exclaimed then, shocked. "I've been so selfish - I never thought. You must **really** be missing Jon!"

His expression clouded over. "Yeah, that's the toughest bit, apart from Lois. I keep thinking I'm probably missing some very important part of his growing up."

Laura stared at him, wide-eyed. "And Conor's there instead, and he probably thinks Conor's his...." She trailed off, unwilling to speak the word.

But Clark smiled slightly. "Actually, no. To start with, Lois left him with my parents - Conor's flown her down each evening to see him. And she says Jon knew Conor wasn't me."

Changing the subject slightly, Laura dared to exercise her curiosity. "Will Jon be a Superman as well, do you think?"

He threw her a quizzical glance. "In the sense of having Super-powers, or of wearing the Suit?"

"Well, both, I guess," Laura replied with a shrug.

Clark sighed. "We have no idea what a half-Kryptonian will be like - but it's possible that he'll have my powers in some form. As for being a Super-hero - well, I'd have to say that'll be up to him. I'd never want to force anyone to take on this life. It's not easy. At times it's damned hard, in fact. And Lois has to put up with a hell of a lot, a husband who runs out on her all the time and leaves her with a baby to take care of. I can never promise to stay home and babysit, because if there's an earthquake somewhere I can't **not** go and help. Or if I did...."

"You'd never be able to forgive yourself if something happened which you could have prevented," Laura replied softly. "The thing is, if your son is anything like you and Conor, he won't be able to stop himself helping, doing good. You can't - you could no more walk away from someone in trouble than you'd cut off your right arm. And Conor was the same - **is** the same," she added shakily, realising how close she had come to allowing her sub-conscious fear that she would never see Conor again voice itself. "When he first realised he really was Superman, he didn't want to wear the Suit and fly around saving people - but the instant he heard someone calling for help, he had to go. **Wanted** to go. And... you're right, it's tough - but I wouldn't have him any other way."

Clark held her gaze for a long moment, a silent message in his deep brown eyes. "That's why you're his soul-mate. It's like that for Lois as well, and although I wish I didn't have to leave her as often as I do, she would never want me to abandon someone in trouble in order to

stay with her. Which only makes me feel worse about leaving her, sometimes, but..." he shrugged, "... that's the price I have to pay for having these powers."

"One of the prices," Laura observed dryly. "Don't forget all the various villains, psychopaths and criminal masterminds who come after you because you're Superman."

"True," Clark agreed wryly. "And give them time, they'll come after Conor too. Though given our invulnerability, you'd think they'd know better." He grinned conspiratorially at her. "Ready to go back? I remember you telling me you had an early start on set tomorrow."

He stood, taking her hand and pulling her lightly to her feet before assuming the same flying position as before, with his arm looped about her shoulders and hers around his waist to secure her body beside his. "Fasten your seatbelt; we are ready for take-off...."

- 348 Hyperion Avenue, Metropolis -

"Conor? I never heard you come back last night - where've you been?" Lois put down the slice of toast she had been eating and eyed him curiously. He looked tired, drained, in a way that Clark only did when he'd been assisting with an emergency which had involved loss of life.

Before replying, Conor quickly spun out of his Superman costume and helped himself to coffee. "Sorry - I ended up helping out with a bush fire in Australia. Then...well, I just flew around looking for Tempus."

"Tempus?" Lois frowned, then looked excited. "Have you seen him? Is he here?"

Shaking his head, Conor explained. "I was just fed up with waiting for him to show himself - I don't know how Clark's coping, he didn't really say last night, but I don't think I could take being here like this indefinitely. Being separated from Laura, and having to pretend to be someone I'm not... I can't do this, Lois."

Lois grimaced; pretending to be someone else was what Conor had done for a living until recently, she mused. On the other hand, she supposed that at least when he was acting everyone had known it was a pretence, unlike this situation where he had to keep up the act almost continually. "So you went looking for Tempus?"

"Yeah, but I know what you're going to say, Lois. It was a crazy idea - I mean, he could be anywhere. Any *time*. Why should he be hanging around in this universe, in this time-frame, just waiting for me to find him?" He sighed. "Give me five minutes to get showered and shaved, then I'll be ready to leave."

As they drove to the Planet, Lois watched Conor out of the corner of her eye. She had only allowed herself to realise the previous evening just how much he was missing Laura; but as well as that, it occurred to her that he really seemed to be miserable in her world. It seemed to her inquisitive mind that there was something more on his mind

than simply missing his fiancée. It was almost as if something was draining away his enthusiasm, his zest for life and his desire to be happy. If he had been her Clark, she would almost have wondered whether he had come into contact with red Kryptonite, or was suffering from lack of exposure to the sun. Yet Conor had been out in daylight any number of times, and she was pretty sure he hadn't encountered any of that other stuff. Clark had told him all about it and its effects that day Conor had been exposed to green Kryptonite, so Lois felt sure that he would have recognised it.

"Conor?" she prompted softly. "You can talk to me, you know. What's bugging you?"

He grimaced. "It just doesn't feel right, my being here. I don't know what it is, but... I don't feel sick exactly, but it's as if there's something inside me which is slowly dying. I know that sounds weird, but I can't explain it any better than that. I've never experienced anything like this before, not until the last couple of days."

Lois caught her breath, appalled. He sounded so depressed. "It couldn't be... something about this world which you're, oh, I don't know, sort of *allergic* to, could it?"

Conor considered for a moment. "I've never had any allergies so I don't really know what that would feel like. And it doesn't feel anything like I did after the Kryptonite - there's nothing *physically* wrong. I just feel... miserable, like I don't care about anything really. Though that's not entirely true, 'cause I do want to get home to Laura, more than anything."

"It doesn't sound like red Kryptonite then," Lois commented thoughtfully. "That affected Clark mentally, but when he became apathetic he really didn't care about *anything*." She threw another glance at Conor; she was concerned for him, of course, but at the same time she was wondering whether whatever was wrong with him was also affecting Clark. If Clark was sick, or miserable - more than would be explained by missing her and their son - and she couldn't be there for him... the thought depressed her still further.

She drew the Jeep to a halt at an intersection, and regarded Conor thoughtfully. As she had noticed when she'd seen him in the kitchen, he didn't look at all his normal self. Of course, they had both been under a tremendous strain over the past few days, and it didn't help having to behave at the Planet as if everything was normal - normal for Lois, that was. Conor was having to play the role of his lifetime. She met his gaze now, and was shocked to the core. All the life seemed to have gone out of his eyes; the humour and sparkle which had been so obvious only a couple of days earlier. His brown eyes seemed deadened.

"If it is something to do with your being here, I can't understand it." Lois's voice was concerned but mystified. "The other Clark was here for several days, and he was fine. And Clark was in your world with me...." Her voice trailed off.

"I'm sure he's fine." Conor managed to sound convincing.

Just then, his attention seemed to be caught by something Lois could neither see nor hear. His mouth turned down at the corners and he muttered, "I need to go - there's a hijacking out at the airport."

"Sure," she responded, easing the car away from the intersection as the lights changed to green. "Just let me turn down that alley - no-one will see you if you take off from there."

Conor flew across the Metropolis skyline on his way back to the Planet; the crisis at the airport had not taken long to resolve once the hijackers had realised that Superman was present. They had given themselves up and had allowed him to supervise the release of their hostages. Conor had been quite relieved at this outcome, since he was aware that Clark would have dealt with similar situations on numerous occasions, and he didn't want any comparisons being made between Superman's tactics on this occasion and on previous ones.

He just couldn't understand why he felt so low. It seemed to him that it was a struggle to generate any enthusiasm whatsoever; even now, when he knew that he was required at the Planet in order to safeguard Clark's position, all he wanted to do was to find some remote location where he could curl up and shut out the rest of the world. And yet he had never been a defeatist. His habit had always been to look for the positive, to think of ways out of situations rather than allow them to get the better of him. Maybe Lois was right, he thought bleakly; perhaps it was something to do with prolonged exposure to this world.

As he prepared to land discreetly in the alley behind the Planet, he became aware of something, or someone, calling to him; he froze as he realised that it was Clark.

< < Clark! The telepathy's working again?>>

< < Looks like it>> Clark's voice came in return. < < I just decided to give it a shot. Have you any idea what happened last night?>>

Conor sighed heavily, but before he could answer Clark interjected, < < It's okay, I can tell you were as baffled as I was. Look, Laura's fine - she was just disappointed at not being able to talk to you for longer.>>

< < Is she with you now?>> Conor asked, for the first time that day experiencing a feeling of interest in something.

< < Sorry, no. She's on set, and I'm out flying - I was helping at a landslide until a few minutes ago. Look, there's something we need to talk about.>> Clark's tone was impatient, as if anxious to concentrate on business.

< < Okay, shoot>> Conor agreed, taking off into the air again; it wouldn't do for anyone to see Superman hovering near the Planet building.

< < We need to figure out how we're going to get hold of Tempus and get him to swap us back.>>

At that statement, Conor grunted sarcastically. < < Yeah, sure! And have you any bright ideas as to how exactly we might manage to

achieve that?>>

There was a pause, and Conor realised that he could sense Clark's emotional state; the older man seemed every bit as frustrated as he himself was. And there was something else.... < < Clark - have you been feeling any... different over the last couple of days?>> he asked, an urgent note in his query.

Clark seemed to consider before replying. < < Yeah, I have, but... yes, you're feeling the same, aren't you?>> he added quickly. < < I can sense it... a kind of melancholy.... I thought it was just that I was missing Lois and Jon, but this goes beyond that, doesn't it?>>

< < Yeah, it does>> Conor agreed. < < Lois said if she didn't know better she'd think it was red Kryptonite; then she wondered whether I was allergic to your world or something.>>

< < And yet the other Clark wasn't>> Clark mused, sharing his thoughts with Conor. < < And I was okay here at first - but now there's definitely something wrong. It's as if I'm sick in the mind somehow.>> He hesitated, thinking, then added, < < You know, I think Lois could be right.>>

< < Isn't she usually?>> Conor threw back at his counterpart, without a hint of sarcasm. He had come to admire Lois's intelligence and ability very much over the past few days.

< < So that makes it even more urgent that we find a way to get back home>> Clark stated.

< < But how? I've been scouring the country for Tempus - I was out all night>> Conor told him, a frustrated note to his voice.

< < I don't know either>> Clark admitted, < < although given the chance I'd love to set a trap for him. The problem is, what with?>>

< < What, a 'come and get me' type of thing?>> Conor enquired. < < Trouble is, he doesn't need us to do that. He can come and go whenever and wherever he wants. He could be in your dimension or mine - or even this other Clark's - and we don't even know which *century* he's in, let alone which day.>>

Conor could sense Clark's concern, and also the older man's increasing agitation and despair, even before Clark answered him. < < I guess what worries me, Conor, is that Lois might take a risk in order to tempt Tempus to show himself. Can you... well, will you watch over her for me? Don't let her do anything stupid.>>

< < Sure. No problem>> Conor answered, though he was secretly none too sure of his ability to prevent a determined Lois Lane doing anything she wanted to do. She was already aware of his mental state, and he felt sure that she would already be wondering whether Clark was being affected in the same way. The chances were that she was already working out some move to try to force Tempus to show his hand.

< < I'll do my best, Clark>> he added. < < And - look after Laura, yeah? She's not used to all this 'dangling over the jaws of death' stuff, you know?>>

< < I know. Look, this is kind of wearing me out, so I'll try to talk to you later, okay?>>

< < Sure.>> Conor allowed the 'connection' to close, and doubled back to reach the Planet. The conversation with Clark had restored some of his normal equilibrium; to know that his unsettled mental state was not actually his fault but was very possibly the result of his enforced stay in this alternative universe at least provided him with an explanation. And the fact that the telepathic connection had also worked again at least gave him confidence that it might work a third time.

A few minutes later, he exited the elevator on the newsroom floor, straightening his tie as he did so, and glanced around for Lois. He couldn't immediately see her, but Jimmy bounded up to him instead.

"Hey, CK! Great game last night, wasn't it?"

< Game?> Conor inwardly grimaced; one thing he did *not* share with Clark was the older man's keen interest in sport, and he rarely watched the big football or baseball games. Yet he was well aware that Clark *did*, and that Clark Kent would certainly have watched whatever game was on the previous evening. He frantically tried to remember anything he might have seen or heard about who had won, or which teams had even been playing. He guessed it was football - Superbowl possibly - but....

Stalling for time, he grinned at Jimmy and replied, "Sure, wasn't it?"

Jimmy frowned slightly. "I was sure you'd be bummed, CK! I mean, the Bills lost! Okay, it was pretty close and all, but...." He threw Conor a curious stare.

< Okay, Clark supports the Bills.> Conor summed up the situation and, improvising for all he was worth, assumed a mournful expression and allowed himself to lie. Not lying - acting, he reminded himself. "Yeah, sure, that was a bummer all right. Lois'll tell ya - I was in a foul mood once the game was over. But..." he shrugged, "betcha they'll win next time."

Jimmy laughed sceptically. "That's what you said last time, CK! Look, I'm tellin' ya, the Bills are on a losing streak. It's that new manager, he should never have sacked..."

As Jimmy chattered on, discussing the tactics of the team's current manager, Conor groaned silently. There was no way he would be able to cover up his ignorance on this topic: Clark was clearly an expert here, and Jimmy knew it. He briefly closed his eyes: could he take Jimmy into his confidence? Would the younger man believe him? And - most important - could he do it without giving away the secret that Clark Kent was Superman?

Plan A, if he could manage it, was to find an escape route; while he was pretending to give Jimmy his full attention, Conor was actually surreptitiously scanning the room. Just then, to his relief, the editor-in-chief emerged from the back office. Interrupting Jimmy's flow of words, Conor explained that he needed a word with Perry

urgently.

Jimmy's face fell. "Oh, sure, CK. I didn't realise you were busy - breaking story, huh? Talk to you later, okay? I wanna know how much you're prepared to bet on the Bills winning their next game...."

Feeling a little guilty about deceiving this very open and friendly young man, Conor hurried over to Perry White. Thankfully, he knew that there was something he could use as an excuse for approaching the editor, and he quickly explained that he had an exclusive on the hijacking, including an interview with Superman. As he spoke, he hoped desperately that this was something that Clark would do in real life; it had become apparent to Conor over the past couple of days that the apparently intimate atmosphere of the Daily Planet as depicted by the TV show was not at all realistic. The editor, although he possessed a caring nature masked by a gruff exterior, was usually far too busy to swap anecdotes or follow every detail of his staff's lives.

"So what are you waiting for, Kent? Get and write it up! I want the story on my desk in under an hour!"

Conor hesitated; did Clark still call Perry White 'Chief'? How would Clark reply to such a command - or would he simply nod and walk away? He crossed his fingers mentally and replied briskly, "Sure thing, Chief." To his relief, the editor didn't bat an eyelid, merely grunting before returning to his office.

Thus dismissed, Conor went to Clark's desk and did as he was told, though Lois's continued absence bothered him. Although her diary indicated that she'd had an interview to conduct on the other side of town, he considered that she should have been back by now. He recalled Clark's words about Lois's tendency to take risks, and as he sent his story to Perry - taking the chance that he had copied Clark's style sufficiently well - he mused on the possibilities, rubbing his chin thoughtfully as he stared into the middle distance. Should he go to look for Lois, and incur her wrath if she was perfectly safe? On the whole, though, he considered, he'd rather face an irate Lois Lane than a furious Clark Kent; and so, informing a colleague that he had to meet a source, Conor hurried from the building.

- Santa Monica, An Alternate Universe -

Clark finally arrived back at the Kane/Lindsay house in late morning, having been further delayed by a traffic pile-up caused by motorists rubber-necking at an accident on the other side of the freeway. He had resisted the temptation to lecture those drivers he'd pulled out of the wrecks of their cars, recognising that his bad temper was as much due to his mental state as it was to annoyance at the recklessness of some of these crazy drivers.

He made himself some coffee and began to contemplate his next step. Conor was right; there was little point in searching for Tempus. The man just had too many options when it came to hiding. Which meant that their only course of action was to wait until he showed himself; but that was incredibly frustrating. Clark wasn't sure how much

longer he could cope with this separation from his family, and with what really seemed to be some sort of allergy to this universe.

Just as he'd started to give some thought to what sort of trap it might be possible to set for Tempus, however, he caught sight of something landing in the back garden, near the trees. Frowning, he hurried out and found a brick with a sheet of paper tied around it. Clark unwrapped it, and read the message on the paper.

"Does Clark Kent care about this world's 'Lois Lane'? If so, he might want to try looking around the Encino Reservoir."

The reservoir... it was up in the Santa Monica mountains, Clark recalled. But Laura was filming, so how could she be -

He spun into the Suit and took off, heading for the location where she'd said her film company would be shooting that day. Landing nearby, he spun into normal clothes and strolled over to a passing admin assistant, who recognised - as she thought - Conor Kane.

"Hey, Mr Kane! Are you looking for Ms Lindsay?"

"Uh... yeah. I thought I'd surprise her and have lunch with her," Clark improvised.

The woman's face fell. "Oh, I'm really sorry, Mr Kane, but she left a short while ago. She was with somebody - I didn't recognise him, but they went off together in her car."

< Tempus!> Clark felt as if a cold hand was closing over his heart. Laura might not have been Lois, but she was someone dear to him all the same. He quickly thanked his informant, taking care to indicate that it was no big deal and that he would catch up with Laura later.

A bare minute later he was flying over the Encino Reservoir, using his X-ray vision to scan the area for signs of life - particularly a certain time-traveller. Just behind the valley in which the reservoir lay, he noticed a cave, and....

Yes, it was Laura. Tied up, and gagged, but otherwise unharmed from what Clark could see.

He landed by the entrance to the cave and quickly strode in to confront Tempus, who seemed to be waiting for him in the rear cavern.

"Ah, Superman," Tempus drawled. "You did take your time - perhaps I was right in assuming that this woman means little to you."

Clark gritted his teeth. "Let her go, Tempus. This is between you and me."

"Oh, no, Clark - after all, how do I know you won't forget your 'ethics', as you promised me once before that you might? Anyway, I have a plan for dear Laura," he added with a sinister chuckle.

Clark glanced over at Laura, who was crouched in an uncomfortable heap on the ground; he wondered whether he could manage to get her out at super-speed without injuring her, or whether he would need to deal with Tempus first. He was calculating the necessary timings when Tempus spoke again, appearing to savour every word as he smiled broadly, and falsely, at his audience.

"Oh, Clark, I just thought you might like to know. There is a canister of highly poisonous gas in the outer cavern of this cave. I released the lock on it just as you joined us, and so it should now be pretty unpleasant out there. Of course, I know that won't be a problem for *you*, Supes, but Ms Lindsay here will die if she inhales even one breath of the gas, or if it comes into contact with her skin. Oh, and before you try it, even you can't carry her out through that cavern fast enough. Yet if she stays here, in about ten minutes the gas will seep through here and will kill her anyway." Continuing to smile in enjoyment, Tempus faced Clark.

"You... you *maniac*!" Clark made a lunge for the time-traveller, but he disappeared before Clark's eyes. Angry and frustrated, Clark glanced at Laura, who was watching him through wide, fearful eyes. At that moment, Tempus reappeared.

"Useful little gadgets, these time-travelling devices, are they not? I just felt that I should let you know, Clark, that I've also left some Kryptonite in a small lead-lined box over there. The lock on that box is time-locked, and it's due to open in... oh, about five minutes from now. But if you try to interfere with the box, it will open immediately."

Clark's gaze followed the direction of Tempus's hand; there was indeed a box, and his X-ray vision would not allow him to see through it. He guessed that Tempus wasn't lying. "What have you got to gain from this, Tempus?" he demanded helplessly. It didn't make sense; Clark could certainly escape, so Tempus would not achieve his aim of killing Superman.

"Oh, Clark, do you really need it explained to you? I am surprised.... Well, it's straightforward enough. I know how much you love Lois Lane, and that you would do anything to save her life. But how far are you prepared to go for Laura Lindsay, who is in fact Lois Lane but not *your* Lois? You can get out of here, Clark. It's easy. You just walk through that exit, and you're free. But are you prepared to do that, knowing you leave your counterpart's soul-mate to die?" Tempus paused, clearly enjoying his speech very much. "On the other hand, are you prepared to give your own life, to die in agony, so that she doesn't die alone?"

Clark had listened to most of that speech in silence, barely able to comprehend the evil nature of this plan. As Tempus concluded, however, he made a lunge forward and attempted to grab the time-traveller. "There is another choice, Tempus - you take us out of here with your device and return me to my own world, or I'll hold you here to die too!"

But just as he managed to grasp Tempus's sleeve, the man vanished again, leaving only an evil laugh which echoed around the chamber.

A whimper sounded from somewhere near the floor, and Clark swung

around. Laura was still staring up at him; he hurried to her side and broke the ropes which bound her as if they were paper. She coughed as the gag was removed, then gesticulated frantically.

"Go, Clark! Get out of here!"

- The Daily Planet, Metropolis -

Conor circled the area around where Lois should have been for about the fifth time; there was no sign of her. His heart sank; he should have been far more conscious of her safety. He should have gone to look for her long before. God only knew what Tempus might have done with her....

He flew slowly back towards the Planet, half-heartedly scanning the streets below as he went. Then his attention was caught by....

No, it couldn't be....

He swooped down and almost wrenched the door off a silver Jeep Grand Cherokee which was parked at the kerb while its driver munched on a chocolate bar.

"Lois, can I talk to you?" he muttered through gritted teeth.

She had jerked around in shock to face him, but once she realised who was there her expression became stormy. "What's the problem, *Superman*?" she asked, in a voice which was only barely remaining calm.

A muscle jerked in Conor's jaw. "Where the hell have you been?" he demanded in a low voice. "I've been worried sick - I thought Tempus might have got you."

Lois stared at him. "And why might you think that?" Her expression changed. "Has there been any contact from him?"

Shaking his head, Conor replied, "No, but I have spoken to Clark again."

Lois's expression altered completely. "Meet me at the Planet - without this," she added, gesturing at his Suit, before pulling her door shut and driving off.

Conor arrived in the Planet's parking lot before Lois, and as she pulled into her normal space he strolled over, again dressed in Clark's business suit. Under the guise of going out for lunch, they strolled out of the garage and up to street level while he filled her in on his conversation with Clark and explained his fears for her safety.

As he'd suspected, Lois was not precisely thrilled to discover that Conor believed she was incapable of looking after herself. "Look, Conor, she said under her breath but in no less a ferocious tone for all that, "I am well able to look after myself. Clark knows that - he may have taken a long time to learn it, but he hasn't made the mistake in a long time of assuming I need him to watch out for me twenty-four hours a day. And *you* don't need to do that either."

Conor attempted to apologise, but Lois was not easily mollified. She did, however, latch on to the other part of his discussion with Clark, and began to suggest ways in which they could lure Tempus in order to catch him.

Conor grimaced as he kept up his end of the conversation. Was Laura going to become more like Lois now that they knew of their real origins? Could he keep up with her if she did?

- A Cave in the Santa Monica Mountains, An Alternate Universe -

Clark stared at Laura in shock and disbelief. Did she really imagine that he would... how could she think that he would abandon her?

"Laura, don't be stupid. Of course I'm not going anywhere," he insisted as he dropped to his knees beside her and began to chafe her numb wrists.

"Clark - I'm going to die anyway, he said so. Why should you waste your life? You can get out of here - go! And get back to Lois." Laura avoided meeting his eyes as she urged him to escape while he could.

"I am **not** going to leave you," he insisted again. "**And** I will get you out safely."

She stared back at him this time. "But... how?"

Clark gazed at her, his eyes intent, a deadly serious message in their dark depths. "Do you trust me, Laura?"

She met his gaze; those deep brown eyes, so like Conor's, but **not** Conor's... how she missed her fiance! It was so hard, being with this man who resembled him in so many ways, but just wasn't the man she had fallen in love with and with whom she planned to spend the rest of her life. But as she looked into the depths of Clark's eyes, saw the concern for her in them, read in them the sheer reliability and sincerity of this man, she knew what Lois had seen in Clark. If she hadn't met Conor first, she could easily have fallen for Clark. But then... Clark **was** Conor, was another world's version of her Conor.

"Yes, I trust you," she replied huskily. "As much as I trust Conor... and I'd trust him with my life."

"Good." Clark reached for her hand and squeezed it gently. "In that case, I'd like you to do exactly as I say, and I'll get us both out of here."

"What... what do you want me to do?" she asked, her throat drying up. What did he have in mind?

"Just close your eyes," he instructed in a deliberately calm tone. Although he had confidence that what he was about to do would work,

it wasn't something he enjoyed doing, or would have decided to do were their situation not desperate. But he wasn't about to tell Laura that. Clark knew that he had to remain unruffled and exude certainty in his ability to rescue them; she was scared enough as it was, and he didn't want to have to deal with a hysterical Laura Lindsay. Although, given that she was this world's version of Lois, would she become hysterical? He wasn't sure that he wanted to put that theory to the test.

She closed her eyes obediently, though her hand gripped his tightly. "What are you going to do?"

"I think it's probably better that I don't tell you," he replied softly. "Just trust me, okay?" He felt very thankful that her TV show hadn't reached the point where his parents had been kidnapped by Jason Mazik, if - as seemed likely - future scripts would have continued to mirror his and Lois's lives.

Recognising Laura's fear and wanting to comfort her, much as he hoped Conor would comfort his Lois should she need it, he leaned forward and gently pressed a light, reassuring kiss on her forehead. Then he released her hand and stood up, taking a step or two back from her; she started, but didn't open her eyes. Taking a deep breath, he sent a long blast of freezing super-breath in her direction. Within a few seconds, it had had the desired effect, and he rushed forward, scooping her rigid, cold body up into his arms. A split second later, he was flying them out of the cavern. He paused briefly to use his heat vision in order to cause a landslide which buried the cavern and its lethal contents, then flew swiftly homewards.

Landing silently in the back garden of Conor's house, he walked swiftly towards the French doors and carried his stiff, unyielding burden into the living-room, anxious to bring Laura out of her state of suspended animation as soon as possible. The first time he had tried freezing Lois she had been frozen for at least half an hour, but he had been well aware at the time that he had only managed to thaw her in time; much longer and she could have been permanently brain-damaged or even dead. Laying Laura's body on the sofa, he super-spiced upstairs to grab a large quilt from one of the beds, and threw it on the floor beside the sofa; he would need it later. Then he stood with his gaze focused intently on Laura, allowing his heat vision to sweep over her. He was careful to regulate the amount of heat he applied: too much and he knew he could cause permanent damage.

No matter that this was the third time he'd used this technique - or that this time it wasn't Lois, though the fact that Laura was her double didn't help - the minutes waiting for the subject to come around didn't get any easier. His brain told him that he had only been using his heat vision for less than a minute; his frantic heart told him that it had been far too long, and that this time it wasn't going to work.

He dropped to his knees beside Laura, gathering her up into his arms. "Laura - Laura, please, wake up. Come back!"

Nothing.

He tried again. "Laura - you know Conor needs you. You have to come back to me, for his sake. Laura!"

She coughed. "Conor... Conor?" Her eyes flickered open, then closed again. "Cold... so cold..."

Clark swept her body with his heat vision again, thanking whatever invisible powers existed that she had survived. He then covered her with the quilt, gripping her hand to reassure her that she was safe and that she wasn't alone.

Laura opened her eyes again, focusing on Clark. "Clark... I thought I heard Conor calling me! Is he... here?"

Clark shook his head. "No. But he *will* make it back - I promise you that. Just like I'm going to make it home to Lois."

"Yeah," she whispered bleakly. She was finding it harder and harder to sustain her belief that they would be able to undo Tempus's meddling. It had been several days now, after all, and HG Wells had not appeared to put things right. Then she remembered - Tempus!

"Clark - how did you get me out of that cavern? The last thing I remember is closing my eyes and you telling me to trust you...? It went cold..." she remembered, puzzled.

Clark's expression was wry. "I'm sorry I couldn't tell you what I was going to do - I was afraid if I did you'd be too scared to let me go ahead." At her bewildered look, he continued, "I froze you with my super-breath - so you were in suspended animation, more or less, and I was able to carry you out and bring you here."

"You... *froze* me? Like I was in a... freezer, or something?" she asked, incredulous.

"Yeah, a bit like that. Only the freezing is pretty instantaneous, and I can thaw you out quickly with my heat vision. It's safe enough if you know what you're doing, and the subject isn't kept frozen too long," he explained. "I've done it with Lois a couple of times."

Laura struggled to sit up as her brain tried to make sense of what Clark was telling her. What he had done sounded incredibly dangerous... but then, if he hadn't done it, she would have died anyway. She reached out and lightly touched his arm. "Thank you," she murmured softly. "You saved my life."

He shook his head. "You have to know I wouldn't have left. Don't you?"

She met his gaze, nodding after a few moments. "I know Conor couldn't, if it was Lois," she agreed.

Clark straightened. "You need to get some rest, and make sure you're properly warmed up before you do anything else. I want to know how Tempus found you, and whether he said anything about his plans, though - did he mention Lois? And Conor?"

Struggling to her feet, Laura shook her head. "He said very little - he just appeared in my trailer and told me that he had you prisoner and that unless I went with him he'd use some Kryptonite on you. He

had... a piece of what looked like your cape."

Clark fell silent for a moment as he realised that Laura had also risked her life for his. Then, wrapping his arm warmly about her shoulders briefly, he urged her to go to bed for a couple of hours. "I promise you, if anything happens I'll tell you."

- 348 Hyperion Avenue, Metropolis -

"Well, I still think it could work," Lois insisted, gesticulating at Conor as they entered the living-room of her house.

"And I still think it's too dangerous," Conor replied firmly, glaring at her.

"And *I've* told you I can look after myself."

Conor, about to respond in kind, suddenly came to an abrupt halt before, to his own surprise as much as Lois's, beginning to laugh.

She stared at him. "What's so funny?"

He threw her a rueful glance. "We are. We're behaving just like Lois and Clark from Season 2." Catching her irate glare, he explained. "Sorry - I forget sometimes. I mean, the way we showed you two at that stage - you know, when you were friends but still needling each other sometimes. Clark would be over-protective and she - you - would consider taking all sorts of risks."

Lois's mouth curved into a reluctant smile. "I guess we were acting a bit like that. And if I'm honest, I'd admit that I don't take so many risks now. It was easy for a while to be even more reckless than I'd used to be because I knew Clark would be looking out for me, but I gradually learned that he wasn't able to watch out for me twenty-four hours a day, so I calmed down - and he also learned that I was more capable than he sometimes gave me credit for. And then we had Jon, and that changed me too...." She paused, then turned her attention back to Conor. "Okay, so I'm less likely to dangle over the jaws of death these days, but this is important. I think I should do it."

"Do what, Lois?" a smooth voice demanded. She swung around, to find that she was facing....

"Tempus!"

Conor made a quick lunge, but Tempus disappeared briefly; when he reappeared he wagged his finger admonishingly at Conor.

"Now, now, Mr Kane! I certainly wouldn't advise doing anything rash where I'm concerned - remember, without me you don't even have a hope of getting home."

"He's right, Conor," Lois conceded reluctantly, thinking of Clark. She couldn't bear to be separated from him forever, and since there had been no sign of HG Wells in the past few days, she could only

assume that Tempus had killed him. Otherwise, once the writer had been freed by Tempus he would immediately have travelled back to the time when Conor had been sent to her world.

"Just what do you want, Tempus?" Conor demanded angrily. This man had separated him from Laura, and given him probably the worst few days of his life. Now that Tempus had finally shown himself, Conor was not going to let him off lightly.

"Oh, haven't you worked it out yet?" Tempus drawled, strolling over to the large bay window at the front of the house. "You see, Lois may have told you that I love irony. And it struck me that there would be little more ironic than for Ms Lane here to be separated from her 'soul-mate', while at the same time, so far as the world was concerned, Clark Kent was still here, married to Lois Lane. And Superman was still flying around do-gooding. No-one but you and Lois would know the truth." He smiled; a baring of his teeth which revealed a sadistic humour. "And as I see it, neither of you would be happy - nor would your _alter egos_ in the other universe - and so there would be no Utopia. Perfect, as far as I'm concerned."

"Do you seriously think it would get to that point?" Lois demanded cynically. "HG Wells would have come to put things right long before that happened."

"Oh, you think so, do you, Lois?" Tempus drawled. "But then, you haven't seen Herb lately, have you?"

Lois shot a quick glance at Conor; it was obvious that he was thinking along the same lines as was she. Had Tempus finally killed Wells? They had thought it unlikely, as had Clark, but it was certainly strange that the writer had not come to their rescue by now. Her heart sank still further; what could they do now? She glanced quickly at Conor, thinking that it was most probably up to her to come up with a way of defeating Tempus. This actor - however good he had been at pretending to be Clark over the past few days - was still a novice Superman, and did not have either Clark's experience and intelligence, nor her own street-smart wisdom, she considered.

Conor strolled over to her, however, and amazed her by throwing his arm around her shoulders and holding her closely against him. He then threw Tempus a somewhat pitying stare. "Tempus, you probably thought this was a pretty devious plan. But I have to tell you, it stinks. It's pathetic - I can't imagine how you ever thought it would work."

< What *is* he doing?> Lois wondered wildly, casting a quick glance at Conor's face. His expression gave nothing away; his face bore a cynical, supercilious grin.

Tempus straightened. "Oh, do stop trying to insult me, Clark... sorry, Conor. You really are just a pale imitation of the real thing, aren't you?"

Conor's arm around Lois tightened. "Lois doesn't seem to think so," he observed coolly. He bent his head and nuzzled her ear. "In fact, I think Lois thinks I make a pretty good Clark."

Just as Lois was again wondering frantically what he was up to, he

murmured very softly in her ear, "Just trust me. Play along, okay?" He turned back to Tempus and spoke again, slowly and distinctly. "You see, Tempus, what you've forgotten is that I *am* Clark Kent - just from another universe. As far as Lois is concerned, why should that make any difference? The fact that you've swapped me with the Clark Kent of this world is irrelevant. Superman here is married to Lois Lane, and in my world Superman is going to marry Laura Lindsay, who is really Lois Lane. So I'd guess Clark is pretty happy where he is too."

< So *that's* what he's up to!> Lois realised. < But it'll never work, Tempus will never believe it....>

"You're lying," Tempus spat, his lip twisted in a cynical imitation of a smile. "Lois Lane would never settle for anyone other than this world's Kent."

"No?" Conor taunted. "Well, you should have been here last night, then. You'd have seen Lois in the arms of the man she loves."

< Yes, I was> Lois realised; < just not the way Tempus thinks....> Recognising that she needed to make Conor's story look convincing, she moved closer to him, wrapping her arm tighter around his waist and staring briefly and apparently lovingly into his eyes before turning to Tempus. "He's right - I was. So you've wasted your time, Tempus. Conor and I are perfectly happy together - and you know something else? Last night we also talked about how much we both wanted kids."

At that, Tempus definitely looked taken aback, and Conor seized his moment. While the older man's attention was distracted, Conor loosened his grip on Lois and focused on the time-traveller. A quick blast of his super-breath, and Tempus staggered backwards, hitting his head against the windowsill. In an instant Conor was by his side; as Tempus lay semi-conscious Conor searched his body for his travelling device. He found it in Tempus's pocket, a small device which resembled a TV remote control.

Holding Tempus down and glancing around at Lois, who now stood by his shoulder, Conor murmured, "Okay, now I just need to deal with this guy, make sure he can't get away."

"What are you going to do?" Lois asked, concerned.

Conor shrugged, a harsh expression on his face. "What do you think I'm going to do? You know better than I do all the harm he's done - and don't forget he killed the original Lois Lane from my world. He's too dangerous to be allowed any chance of doing this stuff again."

< He's going to kill him> Lois realised, shocked. Some part of her wondered why she should be in any way upset or horrified at the prospect; given all that Tempus had done to herself and Clark in the past, she should be delighted at the thought of his death - especially considering that he now also represented a danger to their son. But somehow... there was something quite wrong about the idea of Superman taking a life. This Superman wasn't Clark, of course, and Clark himself had commented to Lois that he believed Conor's ethics to be rather different from his own. But still... to kill someone?

She laid a hand on Conor's arm. "Believe me, I hate him too, but...."

Conor shrugged again. "Lois, I have to make sure he can never hurt anyone again. Now, stand back," he insisted. She did, unwillingly but reluctant to interfere.

Conor appeared to stare at Tempus for a few moments; the time-traveller lay on the ground unable to move, but his eyes seemed to bore into Conor's as he stared up at his nemesis.

"Well, Superman?" Tempus croaked. "Are you really going to forget all you believe about doing good? Are you going to take a life, deliberately, for the first time?" His expression creased into a satisfied grin. "If that's so, then I've won. Whether I'm alive to enjoy it or not, your own action will have ensured that there will be no Utopia. And that's possibly the greatest irony of them all."

"He's right, Conor," Lois admitted unwillingly. "You know what Superman stands for. Once Superman stops upholding those standards, he no longer stands for what's right. If you kill Tempus... it makes you no better than he is."

Conor heaved a heavy sigh. Lois was right; he knew that, and he knew inside that he could never have killed Tempus, much though he'd wanted to do it. "What I have to do is make sure he can't get away," he gritted, throwing Lois a quick, reassuring glance. He then returned his attention to Tempus, suddenly sending a blast of freezing breath his way. In seconds, Tempus lay on the floor, frozen stiff.

Staring at Conor, Lois demanded, "What made you think of that?" Clark had used that method on her, twice, and had also restrained the Toasters in that way....

Conor shrugged. "We did it in the show once - I thought it might work. Now I just need to get over to my world, and make sure this thing sends Clark back to deal with him before he defrosts."

"Okay," Lois agreed, "but I'm coming with you."

- Santa Monica, An Alternate Universe -

Clark again used his super-powers to check on Laura; she seemed to be asleep still, and her breathing was normal. He felt a little guilty about invading her privacy in this manner, but he was still concerned about her well-being after the experience of being frozen earlier that day.

Reassured, he wandered into the kitchen to make some more coffee; he didn't really want coffee, but it was something to do. He had run out of ideas for finding Tempus, and he also didn't want to leave the house while Laura was resting. That unsettling feeling of melancholy, depression, had still not gone away, and it was magnified with his anger at himself for having allowed Tempus to escape yet again.

As he filled the coffee-machine, however, he heard a faint noise; he engaged his super-hearing to see what was going on. It sounded like... footsteps, outside the house. He quickly used his super-vision to scan the area around the pool, which seemed to be where the sounds were coming from -

- and he almost fell over. Lois and Conor were walking towards the patio doors.

"How on Earth...." he began, then hurried to meet them. Using super-speed, he was beside Lois before she had taken one more step, and swung her into his arms.

"Lois... oh, Lois, sweetheart, I thought I'd never see you again!" he murmured brokenly as he pressed her against him, his lips devouring her face, her eyes, her ears and finally, her lips.

"Clark... oh, I've missed you so much," Lois exclaimed in response, trying to touch all of him at once.

They were oblivious to anyone else for several moments, until Conor coughed loudly. "Look, guys, I understand how you feel," he assured them. "But I need to know where Laura is."

Clark broke away from Lois and faced his younger counterpart. "Of course you do, Conor - I'm sorry." He extended his hand warmly to Conor. "It's great to see you again." Leading the way into the house, Clark then explained some of what had happened earlier. "So Laura's just fine, I promise you - she's just resting."

"Hold on a minute," Conor interrupted, agitated. "You say Tempus had her, and was going to kill her? She isn't hurt, is she?"

Lois frowned; she thought she had probably taken in a little more of Clark's explanation than Conor had. "How did you get Laura out of there, Clark? You didn't... you did, didn't you?"

He nodded soberly. "I had to freeze her - it was the only way."

Conor lunged towards Clark, grabbing him by the throat. "You *froze* my fiancée? You could have killed her!"

Lois caught Conor's arm, though he was so intent on shaking Clark he didn't even acknowledge her presence. "Conor! Conor - Clark wouldn't have done it if he hadn't known it'd be okay. He's done it with me twice, and I'm fine!"

Conor eased his grip on Clark, who looked a little relieved; it wasn't often that he was attacked by someone with equivalent powers to his own, and in any case he hadn't really wanted to fight Conor. He met Conor's questioning gaze, and answered the unspoken question.

"Yeah, I did it to Lois, and she was fine. Really, there was no other way of getting Laura out of there. And she is *fine* - I just made her go get some rest."

Nodding in silent acknowledgement, Conor hurried out of the room;

there was a whoosh as he headed up the stairs at super-speed. Clark rubbed his neck distractedly, his expression somewhat surprised as he realised that it actually hurt. "Remind me not to get into a fight with Conor again in a hurry, sweetheart," he murmured ruefully as he embraced Lois again.

"Laura? Are you okay?"

Hearing the anxious voice, Laura opened her eyes to see an even more anxious-looking male hovering in the bedroom doorway. The hair was rumpled, and he was wearing a business suit and glasses.

"Clark?" Her voice was puzzled, and slurred with sleep. "Why are you dressed so formally?"

She saw him frown, as if what she'd said didn't make sense. Then he spoke again, just one word. "Laura."

That was enough. She threw herself out of bed and launched herself at him. "Conor! Conor, you're back! But when... how...?"

He lifted her off her feet, swinging her around in his delight at being back with her. "Only just now - Tempus came after Lois and me and I managed to distract him and get hold of his device." He broke off his explanation to kiss her soundly, then pulled back. "But are you okay?" he asked, his voice full of concern. "Clark told me he.... Oh, God, I still can't believe he did it!"

She stroked his arm reassuringly as she allowed him to lead her back to the bed. "He had no choice, Conor - I'd have died otherwise. That gas was lethal. And if he'd stayed much longer, he'd have been killed because Tempus had left Kryptonite in the cave."

Conor was taken aback; Clark hadn't mentioned this bit. "Kryptonite? Then... he took a hell of a risk coming after you in the first place."

Laura shook her head. "I'm not sure he knew Tempus had it, though I think he'd have come anyway. Like you would if the positions were reversed?" she finished, throwing him an enquiring glance.

He hugged her closely. "Sure," he murmured huskily. "Oh, sweetheart, I've *missed* you - you can't imagine how much!"

"I've missed you too, you know that," she assured him lovingly. "But I want to know all about their world - what the Daily Planet's really like. Is Perry White really an Elvis fan? Does Jimmy really have such bad taste in women?"

Conor realised suddenly that for most of his time in Clark's world he had been too wrapped up in his own fears and in trying to get back to Laura that he had actually neglected to pay much attention to the real minutiae of Lois and Clark's lives, apart from what he had needed to know in order to play Clark convincingly. Yet, once he and Laura had discovered that their 'fictional' characters actually existed in real life, they had talked a number of times about how much they would like an opportunity to see how Lois and Clark really lived their lives. But he smiled; he could answer some of Laura's

questions. "Yeah, Perry loves Elvis - and I had to sit through a couple of tales, all right. I just hoped my reactions were convincing! And I don't know about his taste in women, but Jimmy *is* a real football fan - and so's Clark! I don't know how I managed to pull it off earlier today when Jimmy started talking about some ball game yesterday that Clark would *definitely* have seen...."

Laura cut off Conor's flow by kissing him again, then she moved away from him a little to ask, "Has Clark gone back, then?"

Conor shook his head. "He's still downstairs, I guess - Lois is with him."

"She is?" Laura jumped to her feet excitedly. Grabbing Conor's hand, she tugged him towards the doorway. "Come on - I want to see her again!" As he initially resisted, throwing her a teasing smile, she stuck her tongue out at him. "Why do you have to be so darned strong, Superman?"

He laughed, and allowed her to pull him to the door.

Downstairs, Lois had filled Clark in on the story of Tempus's disconcertion and defeat. "So he's still there - in our house?" Clark asked. "How hard did Conor freeze him? Not hard enough to kill him, I hope... but I hope it's hard enough for him to still be there when we get back - "

Lois placed her finger over his mouth. "Clark, you're beginning to obsess! No, I don't think Conor would have killed him, though honestly, do you really expect me to be an expert on Super-freezing techniques?"

"Okay, okay," Clark apologised. "Not that I don't think a dead Tempus wouldn't solve all our problems with him, but...." He trailed off, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

"I know," Lois reassured him. "Superman doesn't kill."

"And *this* Superman doesn't either," Conor remarked, as he and Laura strolled into the room. Lois and Clark noticed in surprise that he had changed back into his normal clothes and no longer wore Clark's glasses. "Clark, I'm sorry about earlier, by the way."

Clark smiled wryly at him. "No problem. But you better tell me about Tempus - I'll have to get back and deal with him."

"Sure - but I took a good look at that travel device of his. It'll be no problem getting us back there at the same time we left."

"Us?" Clark threw him a curious glance.

"Yeah - I figured it might be a good idea if I went back with you and Lois to help you deal with him," Conor offered tentatively. On seeing Clark's even more surprised expression, he added a little sheepishly, "It's not that I don't think you're capable of handling him, Clark - of course you are. I know that. But... after what he did to us, and what he did to Laura today... I'd be happier if I could see for

myself that he's out of harm's way."

"Okay," Clark conceded. "I don't see why not - and just to set the record straight, Conor, I'd be glad of the help."

Laura frowned as she watched the interchange. "What do you plan on doing with this guy? Whatever you've done in the past hasn't exactly worked, has it?"

Lois's gaze fell on the travel device which Conor was still holding. "Why don't we send him back in time, to... say, some time in the Stone Age?" she suggested in very dry tones.

Clark grinned; he loved it when Lois had those sort of ideas. "Hey, I'd love to! But remember when Wells left him in 1866 - he still managed to escape."

"Yeah, I'd love to know exactly how he did that," Lois mused aloud.

Laura strolled over to Conor and laid her hand on his arm, while looking thoughtfully at the other two. "You can say this is too Quantum Leap if you like, but... couldn't he have gone back to rescue himself?" Seeing Lois's disbelieving expression, she added, "Oh, don't ask me to explain how it's possible. I never could understand these time-travel paradoxes. But the sci-fi shows all tell me it can be done."

"True," Conor agreed. "The only other solution I can think of is that a Tempus from another dimension rescued him."

"Please!" Clark interjected. "I do **not** want to think that there's more than one of him!"

"But isn't it a logical possibility?" Laura enquired. "I mean, why should there only be a Tempus in your world? From what HG Wells has told us, there is a Utopia in all our worlds eventually. So why not more than one Tempus?"

Lois visibly shuddered. "I have no idea, Laura, but the Tempus who took me to the other Clark's universe was definitely the Tempus we met first in our world. And from what HG said, I think it's the same Tempus who interfered in your world nearly fifty years ago."

"Whatever," Clark interrupted, throwing out an arm to emphasise his view that this wasn't a discussion he was particularly interested in continuing. "I think we need to get back - can you get that machine ready, Conor? Oh, and I think you'd better come as Superman, just in case anyone sees two of us."

"Wait a minute," Laura protested. "I'm coming too." The other three swivelled to look at her in surprise. "Well, I'd like to see your world too, Lois! And I want to be sure Tempus is gone."

Lois and Clark exchanged glances. "Why not?" Lois commented casually. "You'd be very welcome, Laura. I'm not sure how we'd explain you, though!" she added, laughing.

A few seconds later, all four were standing in the living-room of the Kent house on Hyperion Avenue. Much as Conor had done when he had first entered the house with Lois, Laura stared about her with interest, until her gaze suddenly alighted on the frozen Tempus lying on the ground.

"You'd better do something about him quickly, Clark," Lois commented in a biting tone, gesturing in Tempus's direction. "I don't want him melting all over our carpet."

Clark exchanged glances with Conor. < < You hold onto him; I'll defrost him.>>

After several sweeps of Tempus's body with his X-ray vision, Clark stepped back. The time-traveller blinked a few times; Conor shook him roughly to bring him back to full consciousness. As Tempus opened his eyes and saw Clark standing in front of him, he grimaced.

"Oh, if it isn't the boy-scout! And his junior partner," Tempus added sneeringly, glancing around at Conor. "Don't you get tired of dressing in blue Spandex, either of you?"

"Not at all," Clark replied chillingly. "I'd prefer it to wearing guns."

"So what do you plan to do with me?" Tempus enquired, his tone deliberately taunting. "Mr Kane here has already chickened out of killing me - are you going to do the same?"

Suddenly, a familiar voice called from the kitchen doorway, "That won't be necessary, Mr Kent."

"HG Wells!" Lois swung around in amazement. "We were afraid he'd killed you!"

"Oh no, Tempus wouldn't do that. I think, despite his complete lack of morals he could no more kill me than you could him, can you, Tempus?" As he spoke, the writer strolled over and came to a halt just in front of Tempus, who glared angrily at him.

"This time you've gone too far," Wells observed calmly. "So I took the liberty of bringing with me some of the Guardians of Utopia, who will take you into custody - and this time they will ensure that you cannot escape. They have no intention of leaving you to the care of this time's penal system." He turned to face Clark, Lois and Laura. "While, as you're probably aware, Utopia has no prisons - there is no crime, so prisons are not necessary - the Guardians have now constructed a special cell just for Tempus. It is guarded by all of the high-security devices made possible by their time's technology, and we are confident that he will not escape to bother you again."

Suddenly there was a shimmering, and three futuristically-clad men appeared in the room. Ignoring the other occupants, they marched swiftly over to Tempus and seized him, nodding at Conor to indicate that he could release the villainous time-traveller. Then they shimmered again, and all four disappeared. Four other jaws dropped simultaneously.

Wells laughed self-consciously, recalling his companions to the present. "Ah... well, I am sorry to have inconvenienced you for so long. But we needed to be sure that we would be able to find Tempus, and so it was not until you, Mr Kane, overpowered him that we knew we could capture him. Otherwise he would simply have escaped using his device."

Lois shook her head, trying to banish the sensation that this was yet another scene from a futuristic sci-fi movie. "Clark told us that Tempus kidnapped you. We were really afraid that you were dead."

"I do apologise for causing you concern, Miss Lane," Wells replied. "You see, I couldn't return to the point of Tempus's initial interference either, since he disappeared so quickly. I could of course have prevented the swap ever happening, but then we would have lost the opportunity to capture Tempus."

"I understand," Clark replied. "But *you* have to understand, Mr Wells, that we have had a very unpleasant experience."

"Yeah - maybe you can tell us why both Clark and I felt sick in each other's worlds," Conor interjected.

Wells smiled slightly. "Ah, Mr Kane, that is all part of the natural workings of the universe, which is designed to ensure that this sort of, er, dimension-hopping does not happen on a regular basis. You felt fine in Mr Kane and Miss Lindsay's universe initially, Mr Kent, because you had a legitimate purpose in being there - as did the other Superman when he was brought here to help Miss Lane. But on this occasion, the two of you were wrongly swapped. And so your metabolism reacted unfavourably to the atmosphere in the dimension in which you found yourselves."

Conor grimaced; this explanation appeared to put paid to his tentative plans for Tempus's dimension-hopping device. He glanced at Clark, and knew that his counterpart had read his thoughts; Conor could sense Clark's equal disappointment. Something had happened in those first couple of days in Santa Monica; the two men, each an alternate version of the other, had bonded like brothers. They were going to miss that bond.

Wells gave Conor a sympathetic smile. "Mr Kane, I'm afraid I must ask you to return the interdimensional transport to me," he said regretfully, holding out his hand. Conor hesitated. Briefly, he wondered what Wells could do if he refused: he was Superman, after all. And if Clark refused as well....

But he sensed Clark sending a message to him. < < He's right, Conor. I hoped we could keep it too, but we can't keep interfering with each other's worlds like this.>>

< < Yeah, and I guess I do need to stand on my own feet>> Conor replied sadly.

< < Hey, you're doing just fine!>> Clark insisted. < < You managed to overpower Tempus, while I let him get away.>>

Slowly, Conor handed over the device. Laura shot him a swift, concerned glance; she had seen the struggle on his face, and guessed that he and Clark had been 'talking' to each other. She placed her

hand lovingly on Conor's arm. "Hey, sweetheart, at least you and Clark will be able to communicate with each other."

Conor was beginning to cheer up at this thought, when Wells interrupted again. "I'm afraid not, Miss Lindsay. You see, the telepathic connection was only able to operate because both Mr Kent and Mr Kane were not in their correct dimensions. Once that is rectified, telepathy will no longer be possible. The, ah, Kryptonian ability in that regard is not designed to work across dimensions."

Lois wrapped her arms around Clark's waist; she could see that he was also disappointed at the thought that they would never have any future contact with Conor and Laura. She was sad as well; despite her feelings of awkwardness around Conor over the past few days, she felt a real sense of connection to both actors. She released Clark and went to Conor.

"I'll miss you, you know."

He smiled down at her, his expression regretful and sincere. "I'll miss you, too, Lois. You're a wonderful person and a great reporter - and a fantastic mother. Say goodbye to Jonathan and Martha for me, won't you?"

"Sure," Lois replied, reaching out to hug him close. "You know, you'll make a great dad too one of these days."

Laura had been watching this scene with feelings of sadness for Conor; although she herself would have liked to get to know Lois better, she was glad that Conor had had the opportunity. She recognised his sadness at having to part from a genuine friend, and felt for him.

But suddenly Clark was taking her hand. "Laura - I'll miss you," he was saying huskily.

She smiled back at him, the expression a little wobbly as tears began to spring to her eyes. "Me too, Clark. And I'll never forget what you did for me."

He hugged her warmly, tightly. "Take care of him, won't you? He needs you, as much as I need Lois."

"I know," she whispered. To her surprise, Clark bent his head and brushed his lips over hers in the merest whisper of a kiss before releasing her. She glanced at him in surprise, then looked past him to see that Conor was saluting Lois in a similar intimate, but platonic, manner.

Lois broke away to give Laura a quick hug. "Look after each other - and don't worry, you'll have great kids."

"You too, Lois. You have a wonderful man - but then you know that."

Wells coughed again; Conor muttered, "Okay, okay, we're coming." He turned to Clark. "I brought back your stuff - it's in the bag over there."

"Thanks."

Lois watched the two of them, thinking how stiffly they were behaving, how to an observer their words and body language would fail to reveal their true feelings. She couldn't help but be aware of how each was feeling inside, however. Clark's jaw was taut, a true sign that he was having difficulty controlling his emotions. Conor's hands jerked at his side.

Lois gave Clark a little push. He glanced at her, threw her a grateful smile, then reached out to embrace Conor. The two men hugged warmly.

At length Conor moved away. "We have to go now."

As the two went to join Wells, Clark spoke again. "Take care, little brother."

Conor turned back to look at Lois and Clark, who stood holding hands. "I will, big brother."

< < Maybe we'll meet again, some day.>>

< < Maybe. I hope so.>>

The three figures shimmered, then Lois and Clark were alone.

- Three months later -

Sitting up in bed one morning, Clark's face assumed a wistful expression. "I wonder how Conor and Laura's wedding plans are going," he murmured.

Lois took his hand and squeezed it, unsurprised that he should have thought of their alternate-universe counterparts. Clark had achieved a bond with Conor which was as close as that with herself and with his parents, but in a way it was even closer, because of their shared Kryptonian heritage. "Probably a nightmare, judging by what you said. Did you tell Laura about my mother's role in our first attempt?"

He grinned. "Yeah, I did. She understood exactly what I meant, and she said she'd make sure she and Conor resisted the worst of it."

"Well, *how* they get married doesn't matter anyway," Lois commented sensibly. "As long as they end up married, and as happy as we are."

"They will be," Clark replied assuredly. Then he noticed that his wife had made a sudden grab for her stomach, and was trying to scramble out of bed. "Lois? Is something wrong?"

She threw him an agonised stare. "Need... the bathroom...."

In less than the blink of an eye, he had carried her into the bathroom, and then crouch beside her to support her as she threw up. Afterwards, he wiped her forehead with a damp, cool cloth and asked,

"What's wrong, honey? Did you eat something that disagreed with you?"

Shakily, Lois smiled back at him. "I'd have thought you'd know exactly what's wrong, Superman! We've been here before, remember?" He stared at her, puzzled. She raised an eyebrow, and added, "Jon?"

"Lois? You don't mean...." He stared in disbelief and dawning wonder. "We're going to have another baby?"

Her face creased into an enormous smile, which belied the continuing queasiness in her stomach. "In about seven months, honey."

The ecstatic expression on Clark's face somehow made all the horrors of morning sickness worthwhile.

- Santa Monica, An Alternate Universe -

"Well, are you ready to become Mrs Conor Kane?" Conor asked Laura as she sat up in bed next to him.

She swatted him with a pillow. "Laura Lindsay, if you please! You know I'm not changing my name!" She smiled then, forgiving him instantly. "But yes, I'm really looking forward to becoming your wife."

"And I'm looking forward to becoming your husband," Conor assured her.

"I'm glad we managed to get my mother to see sense, too," Laura added. "She just couldn't seem to understand that we just didn't *want* a huge wedding."

"Yeah, I'm glad we won that one," Conor agreed. His face assumed a distant expression then as he added, "I just wish... well, it'd be nice if we could have had another couple of guests here today...."

Laura wrapped her arms around him. "Me too. I'd love to see them again."

"Yeah," Conor agreed. "I miss him - it was so good to talk to someone who knows just what I'm experiencing. And Lois was great too - and you liked Clark, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did," Laura agreed. "I hope everything's all right with them, and Jon - and I sure hope that Tempus never escapes to come after them again."

Conor paused, his face assuming a faraway expression again, but this time he appeared to be concentrating. After a couple of minutes he turned back to Laura. "The telepathy doesn't work any more, honey - but you know, somehow I have this feeling that they're very happy."

- The End -

End
file.